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ISABEL'S * DIFFICULTIES

ON
LIGHT



ON

THE

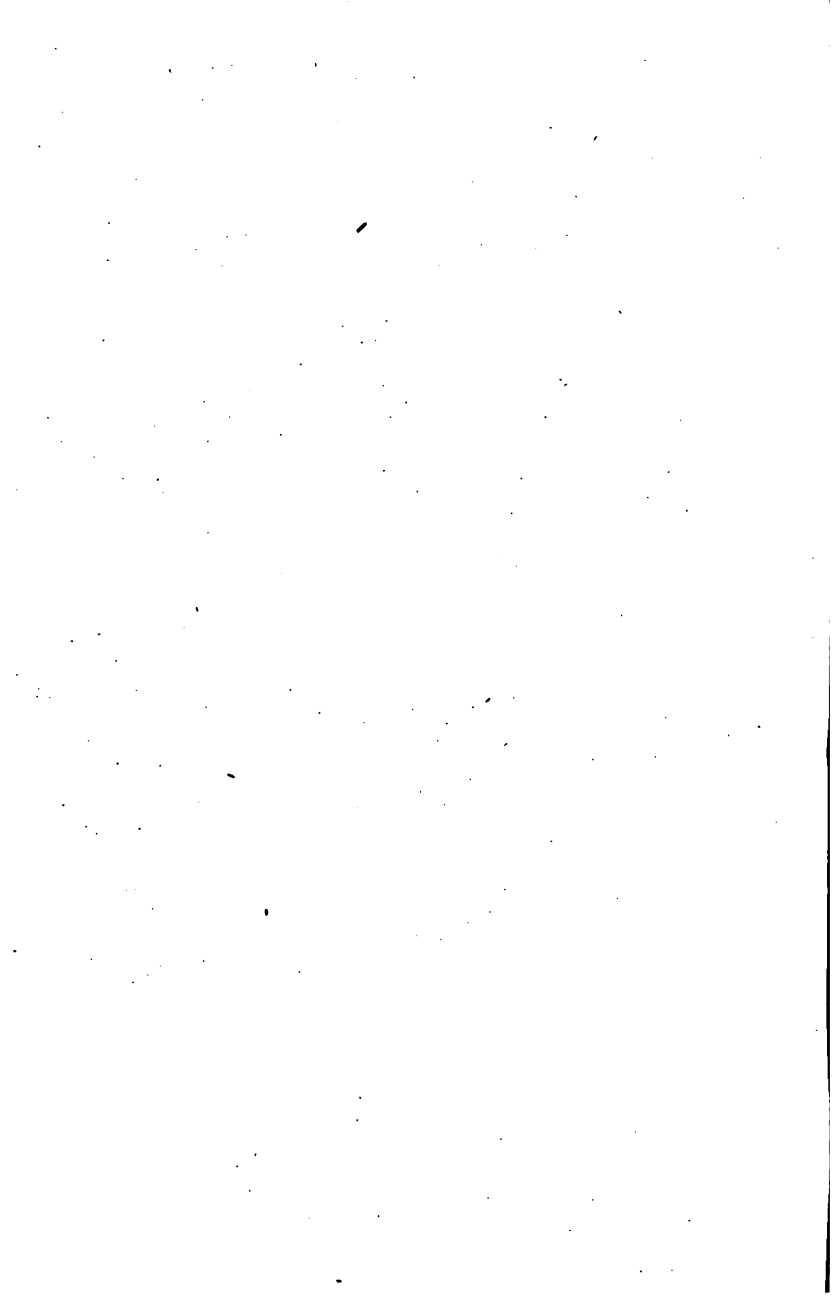
DAILY PATH.



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ISABEL AND MOTHER O'NEILL ON THE LEADS.

ISABEL'S DIFFICULTIES;

OR,

Eight on the Daily Path.

'Still achieving—still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.'

LONGFELLOW.

BY

M. R. CAREY.

AUTHOR OF 'THE OLD UNCLE'S HOME,' ETC.

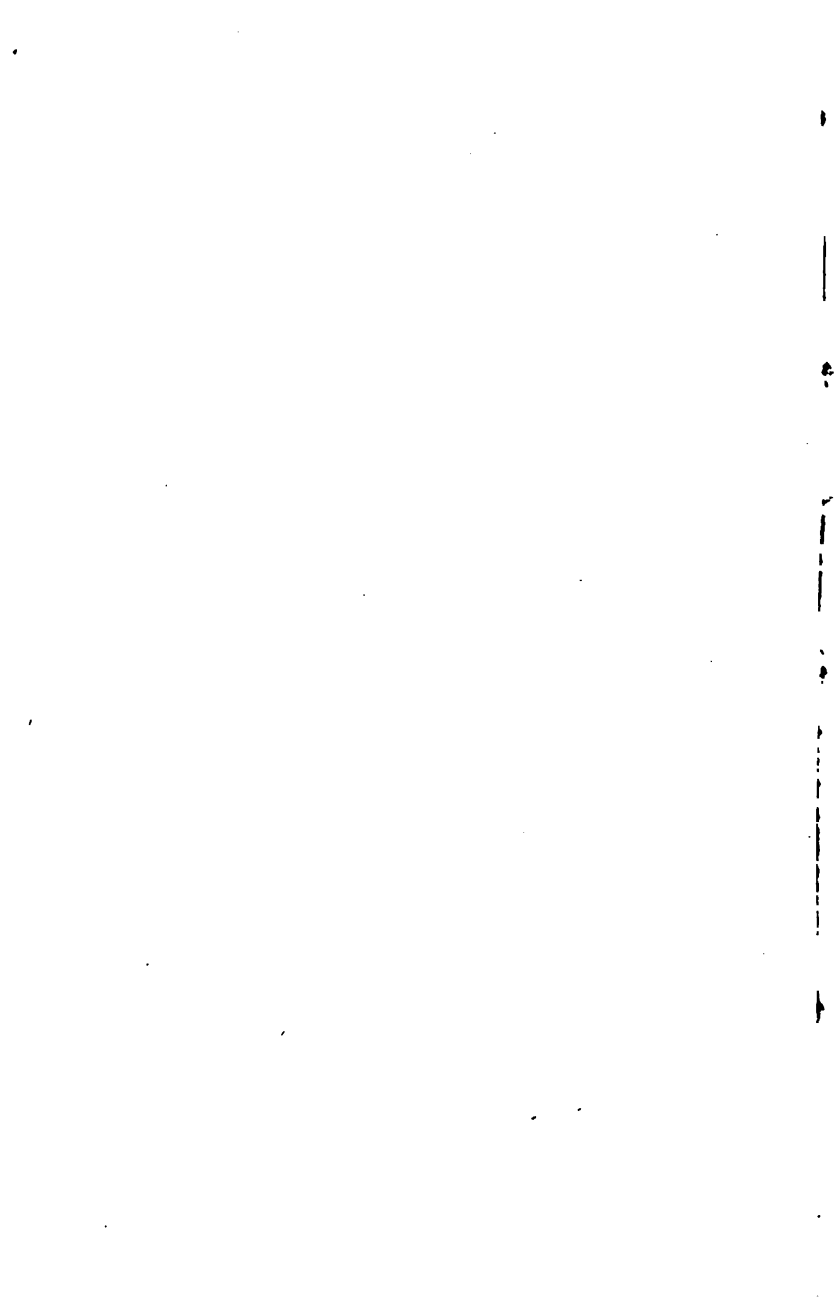
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN ABSOLON.



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251. c. 25.



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ISABEL'S DIFFICULTIES.

CHAPTER I.

TURMOIL.

'Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so ;
Let bears and lions growl and fight,
For 'tis their nature too.'

Watts.



ET us introduce the reader to the scene of our story—to a good-sized mansion, Walpole Hall, the patrimony and habitation for generations of a family of Walpoles.

It stood in a sort of horse shoe valley, well backed by a steep hill immediately behind it ; but overlooking in front a fair reach of landscape, wooded, verdant, and undulating. No one would have guessed, gazing at this, that the spot was only separated by that steep broad hill, from the wild waves of ocean, but such was the fact ; and the river that ran at some distance in front did, after leaving sundry pools, and much meandering, lose itself in the sea, not far from the Hall.

The architecture of the Hall is indescribable. A lordly castle had once crowned the hill; but of this nothing remained except an old tower, adjoining the Hall at its south-west angle, and standing on the same level, but almost built into the cliff behind:—Nothing remained but this tower, and the tradition of mysterious, hollow-sounding haunted vaults, buried in the bosom of the cliff.

The rest of the mansion was comparatively modern, not so much so a long wing of low rooms and many bed-rooms, which faced the tower, as the centre of the Hall, which Colonel Walpole had chiefly rebuilt, and which was the perfection of modern comfort.

Colonel Walpole was by birth a well connected gentleman, and by his marriage with the heiress of the Hall he became also wealthy. He took her name on his marriage.

Their union was blessed with a fair progeny. But many little Walpoles, being still nursery children, and the elder boy James at sea, the two that chiefly concern us are Amy and Tom, who were just anticipating the delights of his first Christmas holidays, with exceeding glee. Their delight was increased by visitors at the Hall, namely, Mrs Walpole's only sister and her husband, with a family quite as numerous as the Walpoles. This uncle and aunt had returned from India about two months previously, bringing with them Grace and Roger, besides a host of small things under their nurse's care. One elder daughter, Isabel, almost immediately joined them. She had been left behind some thirteen years previously, when only three years old, under the care of her father's widowed sister, whilst Major M'Ivor and his wife returned to India. Here the rest of the children had been born. Isabel was just sixteen, Grace about thirteen, and Roger but a month or two younger than his cousin Amy, Tom about eleven.

Christmas day was just approaching. The church decorations had been completed ; preparations made for Snapdragon, for the Christmas tree, for the magic lantern, for all the hundred-and-one enjoyments, in short, that belong to Christmas ;—and speculations had begun concerning the guests to be asked for the New Year's Eve and Twelfth Cake party, this year to be celebrated together on December 31st. Christmas week itself being generally reserved for the family gathering, which became every year larger and more precious.

It wanted half an hour to breakfast, when suddenly, on the morning our story opens, a rush and a scramble were heard in the lower passages of that wing of many bed-rooms, then in succession a fierce cry, the snapping of a dog, the spitting of a cat, the loud laughter of a mischievous boy ;—then a man's voice calling order, and driving off the dog, and all seemed quiet again. But in one poor little breast there still raged an uproar of fury and indignation.

Directly afterwards a little sallow-faced girl, her complexion darkened by excitement, mounted the stairs to the nurseries, bearing in her arms a very diminutive cat. She approached the door of the nursery, and encountered there a big grey woman.

'You aint a-going to bring that shameful cat in here, Miss Grace !' said she. 'I'll have no scrimmaging between you and Master Roger in the nursery, Miss.'

'Floss and Ben will kill it, nurse !' pleaded poor Grace. 'Roger sets them on.'

'Well, and a good job too ! tailless, ugly thing. I won't have it in here,—there now.'

And nurse disappeared.

Grace stood still. It was certainly a tailless, ugly, disreputable looking puss as ever lived ; disliked in the kitchen, no credit to the parlour, accredited with poaching,

because its tail had been lost in a trap, just the cat to set dogs on ; but all the dearer to Grace because of its misery. She was its protector, its sole friend—even aunt Walpole had said that she might keep it ! So she waited until she was alone, until nurse had disappeared, and then slipped on to her own bed-room, where she deposited puss in a deep well-press, full of furs and soft rugs. There having smoothed and ‘loved’ her cat awhile, she left it, to join the family at breakfast.

Grace had used the press for this purpose before, and was most anxious not to betray the hiding-place. It was one which she could share with her darling ; roomy enough for warm comfort among the rugs, and dark enough to be very soothing to the lonely child, who, in her way, was well nigh as persecuted and lonely as puss.

Her mother, from great ill-health and excessive indolence, knew nothing to any purpose of the troubles of her nursery. She trusted implicitly to a powerful, infinitely valuable nurse—that woman in grey—who, by dint of incessant storming and unfairness towards Grace, had succeeded in rousing such a determined opposition to her rule, that she was now somewhat justified in declaring that ‘she could not manage Miss Grace, and could not stand her ways at all.’ Grace richly repaid the aversion.

Upon Roger, too, the mischievous boy, her brother, Grace bestowed almost as hearty a dislike ; and if any little affectionate brothers or sisters are shocked to hear this, it may be pleaded on Grace’s behalf, that her feelings towards him were not without justification.

He was younger, but stronger and taller than Grace. He had discovered his power ; and unfortunately for her, he seemed to have experienced a ‘call’ to keep her in order. Never did she get into a towering rage, not so un-

frequent an occurrence as it might have been, but Roger, if near, came to quench it. He would quiz down all expression of her wrath, and thus bottle it up, until the poor child suffered real pain in suppressing the fury that burned within her ; but in the face of his merciless and public ridicule, she dared not betray herself. Nor did she ever fall into a fit of universal and sullen rebellion, and refuse obedience to every duty and every person within her reach, than ten to one Roger appeared and forced her, by strength or mockery, to yield precisely, where she had declared she never would !

Then he was a pet of nurse's. Grace could trace many acts of Mrs Thirswell's tyranny directly to his (unconscious) influence, and attributed many more. He was perpetually being held up to her as a pattern, though she knew that she did not and could not be up to one quarter of the pranks he played (for Roger ruled by precept and coercion, not at all by example), whilst she got all the scoldings, and he all the praise and petting. And against his ceaseless tricks she had positively no protection, except in concealment or avoidance of him ; remonstrance or complaint were utterly in vain. Little did Roger guess the pain and impotent rage he caused his poor little sister ; she instinctively concealed from him all she could, and he had no eyes to see the rest. Besides which, the extraordinary ease with which silly Grace could be put out of temper, naturally tempted him to amuse himself thus. He had found no one hitherto, to warn him how much cruelty there was in this fun and 'management !'

The family gathered at breakfast ; Grace, assured of her cat's safety, but scarcely recovered from the irritation into which she had been thrown, arrived late, and so had to take the only vacant place, the corner between her aunt and Roger, not the one she would have chosen.

'Whom shall we ask for the Twelfth Cake?' asked Mrs Walpole, after the bustle of beginning breakfast had somewhat subsided. 'It is high time to decide.'

'Ask everybody!' cried Amy.

'But not Red Hot, whatever you do,' retorted Tom.

'Who may he be, Tom?' asked his father.

'Hotspur Montgomery,' responded Tom, 'he does everything that's bad: roasts mice alive, and watches them kicking; plucks birds alive, and bothers girls no end,' completed Tom.

'Oh! the rascal!' said papa.

'We won't have him,' concluded Tom.

'We cannot help ourselves,' said his mother. 'We cannot leave the Montgomerys out, and ask everybody else. Impossible! They are at home, are they not?'

'Yes, I wish they were at Timbuctoo.'

'So you may! but we must ask them nevertheless—and whom else? come name the guests,' repeated Mrs Walpole. 'Come Amy—come William,' addressing her husband, 'choose your guests.'

'The Campbells, then. He must come for shooting, and I dare say you can get Mrs Campbell and the children.'

'And Georgie Jackson, and Milly Davies, and Ruth Glenlyon, and Fanny Howard, and their papas and mammas, and brothers and sisters,' cried Amy, jumping up and down on her chair.

'Thank you, Amy, I won't ask you again!' said her mother, laughing. 'Somewhere over thirty!'

'Oh, the more the merrier,' cried the child.

'Very well,' replied Mrs Walpole, 'I will invoke some common sense, and make out my list. And if you three girls will come to me in the library after breakfast, you can help me to write the notes.'

'Grace ! you had better ask the cat to scratch yours. I am sure you can't write it,' observed Roger, by no means under his breath.

'Grace can try,' responded his aunt, rather sternly. 'Can you and Tom ride out with them ?'

'No,' interrupted Colonel Walpole. 'I can answer that. Roger has an errand in the town this morning ; I want Tom with me, and in the afternoon both boys ride with me to the kennels. You must send the groom.'

And so it was settled.

Here lay an uncongenial task before the poor little girl. She could not write passably, nor spell, 'to save her life !' and most keenly was she alive to her stupidity and ignorance, especially since she had encountered her aunt Walpole, who never in her life had been known fully to believe in a 'can't.' But what was she to do ? Everybody said, what's the use of showing Grace, she *can't*, or what's the good of telling Grace, she *won't* (that is, if they thought about her at all), until she, too, well nigh believed in the truth of their words.

Soon after breakfast the three girls re-appeared, with their desks, ready for work. The tall, graceful Isabel, the crop-haired, sallow-faced, uncouth Grace, the merry Amy (younger, though taller than Grace), with her long curly locks, bright colours, and merry smile, so unusually full of sweet temper and joy.

Mrs Walpole put her writing away, that she might set her young assistants to work.

'Isabel, you write to the Campbells and Davies ; you Amy, to Ruth and Fanny ; and you Grace, please, to Hotspur Montgomery.'

'Ach ! mamma, must we have him ?' said Amy.

'Yes, my dear, of course ; how can I leave him out ?'

'Write him a very untidy note, then, Grace,' remarked Amy, settling herself to her part of the task.

Poor Grace was miserably conscious that she had no chance of writing anything else ! she took up the copy set for the two children, with abhorrence. It was difficult for her to read, but as she sat frowning over it, Isabel, who was becoming painfully alive to her sister's short-comings and difficulties, said aloud, 'We are to say this, aunt ; are we not ?'

'The Misses and Master Walpole request the pleasure of Master Hotspur Montgomery's company, on December the 31st, at 5 o'clock.'

'Yes, that's it,' said Amy, 'make haste, Isabel !'

Grace heard and remembered the words,—but how in the world to spell them ! she pondered, and experimentalized ; and at last the note stood thus :—

'the mis and marster wallpools rekwest the pleshur of marster hotspur mungumeris cumpanny on december the 31 at 5 oclock.'

Delightful for aunt Walpole when she should see it ! which she did almost immediately, and looked at its untidy surface in dismay.

'My *dear* Grace—can't you do better than this?' she exclaimed in amazement. Then subduing her tone, she added kindly, for it was *so* bad, she felt for the girl's shame, 'I am afraid this cannot go. Perhaps Isabel will write it for you, if you are tired !'

And Grace sullenly assented. She as sullenly got out of the room immediately afterwards, but not before she saw Isabel take the disgraced note and burn it, to write another in its stead.

This completed all the help the girls could give ; they therefore left the room : Isabel to seek her sister, Amy

to accompany Isabel, if she might. But this time the latter declined her company. She had had enough experience of Grace's temper to feel sure that it was now exceedingly ruffled, and required no third person's presence to make it rougher. She determined, therefore, to seek Grace by herself, and so she told Amy.

And Amy left her, running merrily upstairs, along one 'best passage,' jumping some steps into a lower long white-washed passage, into which many black doors opened from various rooms. Along this she danced, until she found herself at the Walpole's nursery door, through which she entered, and mightily disturbed by her presence, all the sports and business that was going on there. But we must go with Isabel.

She had followed Amy thoughtfully up the best stairs, and along the best passage; but at the steps she turned off into another, running at right angles to it, and turning into the bed-room wing before mentioned. This led to her mother's room at its end; nearer as you approached its entrance, to her father's dressing-room, to her own and Grace's bed-room, to Roger's bed-room, and at the entrance to the M'Ivor's nursery. Past the doors of this she softly crept, lest its inmates should pounce upon and detain her, and continued her course to her own room. She knew Grace well enough to feel sure that she would be alone, if possible, when she was unhappy; and she expected to find her there.

But her quest seemed fruitless. Grace was nowhere visible, and Isabel was about to quit the room for her mother's, when pausing to hang a cloak on the upper pegs of *the* press, she was startled off the chair she had mounted, by a howl and a kick from inside, which betrayed Miss Grace's presence. And Grace had her cat there!

'Grace!' exclaimed her sister.

'Get away! get away!' screamed the other. 'I won't come out, no, I won't! and I won't!' she repeated, as Isabel tried first to discover her whereabouts, and then to induce her to leave her retreat. Nor could all poor Isabel's entreaties and remonstrances avail anything, except to cause so much passion on Grace's part, as to astonish and half dismay her sister. Grace, it must be told, was not only excessively wroth, but she was endeavouring to detain her startled cat without betraying it. Isabel at last desisted, hardly able to keep from laughing, yet far more ready to cry. Fearful too, she felt, lest the noise should bring spectators to the scene. She waited a short time in the room; but finding that every effort, even a soothing word, only roused Grace's storm of passion anew, she left her in the hope that quiet and the dark prison she had chosen, would calm her.

For sometime the room remained quiet, and Grace nearly fell asleep with pussy. When she was aroused by the room door again opening, and a voice close by calling her by name. Now it was Roger who called, of all people in the world, to find her there! He had been his errand, and had brought home his earnestly desired canary, and he now wanted one sister or the other to admire it with him.

'If he will only get away,' thought Grace to herself, in great irritation, just long enough to let me get out, or go away altogether; *not* stand there, talking to that bird, and ——'.

'Grace! Isabel! Grace!' shouted Roger.

'Calling me when I don't want to be found, and can't get out, without——'.

'Grace! I say Grace, where can you be? I'll be sure to find you—Grace!'

'That you will ! go away, do,' muttered the girl in her covert. 'Leave that bird, and go !'

But she could hear him unfastening the stiff hook of the cage ; and the canary must have got out, for it was fluttering wildly about, she could hear it, and Roger after it—close to the press—in it.

And then Roger, who had just secured his prey, was infinitely startled by a fierce cry from the foolish child, close under his feet, of—'Get away—do !'

Guided by the sound, in he peeped.

'Hey day !' cried he as he spread the ample folds of a skirt, and peeped beneath it. 'Hey day ! I'm coming in too !' and he essayed to jump in. Oh ! the cat, the cat, *could* Grace conceal it still !

Now this well was no bad resting-place, if you could be placed therein with decorum, and had no objection to the dark, for the dresses hung high, and, as we have said, it was the store place for all manner of warm wraps and rugs. But Grace had plunged herself and its other contents into such a heap of confusion, and was moreover in such terror for her wretched little puss, that between mortification and fear, she was driven half beside herself. She wriggled, kicked, and stormed ; she pinched and thumped at any foot or finger which he ventured to slip in, and so succeeded, minute by minute, in keeping him at bay. Yet there he stayed over her, threatening, laughing, teasing, poking at her, till Grace was at her wits' end to dislodge him.

But pussy was not yet betrayed.

How long this might have lasted it is impossible to say. It was surprising that the noise they made brought no one to the rescue ; but at last a voice was heard at the door, calling for Master M'Ivor. 'Good-by, Grace, my child,' said

he, 'good-by !' and unhooking, by a dexterous twist, the dress he had been holding, he let it fall upon her, shut to the doors of the press, and left the room. At the door he encountered the servant, who told him that Sir William and Lady Montgomery, with the young Master, were in the drawing-room, and that the Colonel had bidden him fetch any of the elder young ladies and gentlemen, whom he could find.

'O ! I'm out, I'm out !' cried the boy. 'I should have been—I would have been—!'

'But, sir ! the Colonel sent—.'

'Find Tom—find the others—I'm out, I'm out !' repeated Roger, speeding past the man to the stairs, and to the hall, just to be caught—unlucky youth, by his uncle at the drawing-room door, and be forced by him to face the company.

He was introduced to a colossal red faced man, with quite a 'hanging copse' about his head, of sandy eyebrows and hair ; to a curiously contrasted little lady, undersized, shrewd, and sharp-looking (it was said of her that she possessed but one weakness, fear for her son's safety, and that no one could point to a second) ; and to a boy, whose ruddy hue and clumsy build proclaimed him Sir William's son, yet who bore a strong, if very puffy resemblance to his mother. He looked cunning, but scarcely daring enough to be sharp. This was 'Red Hot,' but to the choice of this cognomen his proper name and hue must have largely contributed.

'Lady Montgomery is an old friend of your mother's, my boy,' said his uncle, as he brought Roger forward.

Roger shook hands with all three, and then stood by Hotspur looking, as he felt, shy and uncomfortable. After a few minutes, his uncle turned, and observing them, re-

marked : 'cannot you boys find something to do ? There are paper and books on that table ; or stay, Roger ! were not the ponies coming round ? I dare say you and Hotspur would like them better than staying here !'

'O ! Colonel Walpole, indeed no !' cried the lady. 'I cannot permit ponies. Our dear boy rides the donkey—nothing else yet. You remember that dreadful fright about my brother ?' addressing Mrs Walpole. I decline ponies, if you please, Colonel.'

'Certainly, Lady Montgomery, if you object—certainly,' ejaculated the Colonel. 'Roger, find something else for your friend to do !'

The boys left the room. 'What shall we do ?' inquired Roger, whose thoughts were full of ponies.

'I don't know—mother's plaguy,' returned the other, 'haven't you a barn or some place ? I've a capital dog there,' pointing to the carriage, 'for a rat hunt.'

'No, the rats are to be hunted next week when the people come. Shall we go and see the dogs ? or are you fond of birds ?' he added, observing Hotspur draw near a cage full in the hall. 'I have a very pretty canary, and we have a parrot upstairs, if you like to come.'

'Very well, I'll get the dog first. Talking of parrots—do you know ! I had a rare row with Hunter (that's my mother's maid) the other day. She had been mooning melancholy for ever so long, moping over a green parrot, and very cross to me. Her husband brought home that parrot in his last voyage (he's just dead, you know)—well—if she hadn't bullied me so, she would have had it still ! I didn't mean to kill it, but——'

'But —,' we do not see any necessity to repeat Master Hotspur's boastful narrative of cruelty. Whatever he meant not to do, he did kill that parrot under

circumstances of suffering, the very thought of which ought to have bowed him to the dust with shame.

The poor bereaved woman, who reached her room in time to see her husband's last gift perish, dealt him, as Hotspur energetically declared: 'a beastly blow,' which sent him sprawling along the ground. 'And then,' continued the boy. 'She marched clean off to mother, the sneak! and blabbed that I owed her over four pounds.'

'But *did* you?' exclaimed his disgusted companion.

'Did I! yes, and what then? I had owed her more before, and I'd have paid her when I could. It's all bosh her wanting the money. She'd no right to tell of me in that way, and get me into such a row, it was worth remembering! and some day I'll ——.'

'Have done, will you!' cried Roger, dealing a hearty blow into the middle of his companion's chest, which caused him, in all astonishment, to plunge backward, and drop his dog. 'Have done! I'll hear no more of your ——.'

'Eh, what?' ejaculated Hotspur, picking himself up, and feeling terribly conscious that he ought to thrash his small but very fierce opponent. It was no little relief to him to see Miss M'Ivor standing on the landing-place above, which of course stopped the fray. And Roger, turning with an indignant snort, led the way to his sister's room.

Grace had, when Roger left, determined on leaving her retreat. It was no longer a secure place for herself or pussy, or at least, it would be so no longer if puss were once discovered. But she was worried and weary, and *where* could she go! She took time to gather resolution to stir—too long alas! For her brother's voice arrested her, just as she was beginning to emerge, and she slid, with a slight rustle, back into her hiding-place.

The noise, slight as it was, caught the ears of Hotspur's little dog: he pricked them up, sniffed at the room-door, and pushed it open. And now Roger, suddenly remembering that Grace might still be there, imprudently caught his companion's arm, and bade him recall his dog and 'come away.'

Not a very likely thing, friend Roger; for Hotspur, convinced that some fun, distasteful to Roger, might be had inside, a much more agreeable way than fighting, of paying him off, in his opinion; urged by the barking of his dog, who was now violently attacking the press, and by his own innate love of mischief, not only pushed after Pincher, but succeeded in turning the lock of the door upon Roger before he could follow.

Thus bolted out, Roger pushed and shook the door in vain, whilst within, to the snarling of the dog and the laughter of its master, were speedily added the shrieks and cries of poor Grace, who, evidently by the noise, was being driven from her hiding-place, and chased round the room by the dog and Hotspur.

Who shall depict Roger's fury now! But all his frantic efforts to burst in upon the fray were in vain, until a stronger arm than his interposed, and by one determined action, broke the lock and opened the door. The scene within was one of the wildest confusion. Grace had just fallen headlong from the bed, across which, in her terror, she had sprung; the dog was shaking poor pussy in his teeth on the floor; the furniture, clothes, etc., were scattered in all directions, whilst the rascally Hotspur stood laughing loudly in the middle of the room, encouraging his dog by every means he could think of!

'What is the meaning of all this?' called out a voice so stern and loud, that Hotspur started, alarmed in his turn.

But before any answer was possible, Roger, white with intense rage, had flung himself upon Hotspur, upsetting him, and fastening upon him with surprising power. Grace took the opportunity of rushing out of the room, whilst Pincher, seeing his master's predicament, flew snapping and snarling to his rescue. But a kick from Colonel Walpole's boot sent him off faster than he came.

'Roger!' exclaimed his uncle, 'Stand up—stand off, Hotspur—I insist upon it,' he repeated, as Roger continued shaking his victim with all his strength. His uncle raised him by force, and again repeated his indignant question, 'What can be the meaning of all this?'

It was with much difficulty that he got an answer. The combatants combined to tell him both sides at once. But when he could extract something of the truth from their confusing reports, he desired Roger to go to his room until he sent to him, and he marched Hotspur by the shoulder down stairs, to his father and mother.

'Sir William, I regret,' he sternly began. But he was interrupted by Lady Montgomery. Who, on catching sight of her son, immediately began :

'Hotspur! you are in a very great mess; and we are going to lunch at Lord Monteagle's! My dear Mrs Walpole, pray lend me a clean collar, and a brush and comb or something. O! HOTSPUR! Pray, Colonel Walpole, spare me any stories of fighting, boys will be boys, you know, but dear, dear! Hotspur! for shame, for getting into such a mess—a clean collar, pray, Mrs Walpole?'

And the interruption completely *posed* the Colonel. It was so incongruous with the scene he had just witnessed, and the feelings to which this gave rise, that he could scarcely maintain his gravity. However, after Lady Montgomery had rescued her son, and, accompanied by Mrs Walpole

carried him off to be 'tidied,' he thought it his duty to give Sir William a short account of what had happened.

'Little fool! what did she get into the press for then? Hunted her out with Pincher! ha! ha! he can bite, too! he bit me once! what a fellow that Hotspur is, to be sure. Of course I am sorry, Walpole, very sorry. But may I order my carriage. Here comes my Lady, and we shall be late at Lord Monteagle's!' and this was all Sir William had to say on the subject.

Immediately afterwards they left. Then Colonel Walpole issued his positive commands to his wife, that neither Hotspur nor his parents should be asked to their Christmas parties. 'I won't have such a fellow in my house,' said he. His wife cordially agreed, and grieved and angry, left the room to see what mischief had been done.

Passing on the stairs a curious group of small children, she desired them to seek, among the notes on the hall table, the one for Lady Montgomery, and burn it, as Hotspur was not to be asked.

Down they trooped into the hall; '*not* to be asked.' 'Oh, how nice—how very nice,' 'how glad they all were;' and the note was found—solemnly borne to the fire, and there burnt. The children watching it, as it flamed up, with a sort of mysterious feeling, that they were doing justice upon Hotspur himself, by burning his invitation. It was gone;—and then began the questioning: 'But why?—what had Hotspur done?—why might he not come?—it must be something dreadful to make mamma speak like that!'—'and papa, too!' as if his passage past the doors and stairs that led to the various habitations of these little folks, had not awed them back worse than the noisy dog had done, he did look so dreadful!—and the dog too, and Grace and Roger! All three had run away, and hid them-

selves, no one knew where ! The dog had been seen ' to cut away like mad,' because Billy M'Ivor had been peeping out of his door, and had seen him, and shot back in consequence. It was all very odd,—and very wonderful ; —but Hotspur was not coming, and this made it all right !

So the little people continued their course to the dining-room, and ceased to wonder so very much.

Three facts had been imparted to Mrs Walpole by her husband, and to these she added her own knowledge of Grace's sulky conduct in the morning. That the two boys had nearly had a fight on the landing, chiefly Hotspur's fault, as the Colonel willingly believed ; that Hotspur had cruelly worried Grace out of the press ; but that the girl had lain there for some time, long enough for something very like a quarrel to pass between her and Roger, a sort of addenda to one that had occurred in the morning !

She therefore mounted the stairs with decision, determined to find one niece or the other, and put a stop to such scenes for the future.

As for the poor little cat, she was found with her back broken, and had to be killed that same afternoon—Grace's only English friend : her only friend at all, that she knew of, except her ayah in India.





CHAPTER II.

A DISTRESSED PEACEMAKER.

‘The time is out of joint ;—O, cursed spite !
That ever I was born to set it right !’

Hamlet.



RS WALPOLE did not find Grace or Isabel in their room. As the reader knows, Grace had escaped without delay, and her sister, on hearing the uproar, and observing Grace's flight, had forborne to follow her, she had repaired instead to her mother's room, fearing that Mrs M'Ivor might have been disturbed by the noise ; and such in truth was the case ! Her mother needed all her soothing care to calm her ; care that Isabel loved to give, and her mother delighted to receive.

A spoiled child all her life, spoiled by her parents, and her more vigorously-minded sister ; spoiled by her petting husband ; and sequestered by her real ill-health, and terrible indolence from the cares and work that might have hardened her : she now accepted as her own by right, the gentle thoughtful attentions of her eldest child.

And Isabel had learnt to be a good nurse, during the long painful illness that had tried for months and months,

the aunt she had lately lost. The devoted care she had joyfully bestowed on this invaluable friend, she was now ready to pour out upon her mother ; who seemed returned just to fill the void in her heart, and to revive the happy cherished memories she had herself left in the girl's recollection.

She now took her place by her mother's chair, and endeavoured to soothe the nervous alarm that the noise in the next room but one had occasioned.

'But the dog! my dear Isabel—he was there! what business had he there? who could have brought him?'

'Indeed, mamma! he had no business at all there, I should think. He was in the arms of a boy bigger than Roger, when I saw him on the stairs.'

'Who was the boy, my dear? Very extraordinary to bring a strange dog into your aunt's bed-rooms!'

'Very, mamma, I don't think he will come again though! for I met him, as I ran up, racing out of the house as fast as his legs could carry him.'

'And your uncle;—I thought I heard his voice? Surely it was he who shook the door so violently? He burst it in, it seemed to me! Really, my dear, it was a dreadful noise! I thought he seemed scolding Roger; and Grace, I thought, was screaming;—what was it all about, Isabel? I *hope* they are kind to the children! *were* the children naughty, my love? It is dreadfully trying to hear so much, and be able to do so little!'

'I really hardly know what has happened. I heard a great noise,' replied Isabel, 'and I ran up stairs to see what was the matter. But my uncle passed me, and was in the room before I reached it. But here comes aunt Jane! perhaps she can tell you more.'

Yet the troubled look that Isabel gave Mrs Walpole, as

she entered the room, conveyed to that lady's mind the understanding, that the least said to Mrs M'Ivor, on the matter, the better. She therefore smoothed her ruffled brow, before she reached her sister's side.

But she was not a lady who *could* allow such senseless and unbecoming disturbances in her house. She never had been known to stand rebellion and uproar in her life ; she was not going to begin now. Indeed, until such a born rebel as Grace had crossed her path, no one ever disputed her sway. But Grace baffled even her aunt. Perhaps because if measures of repression would do her any good, those she required were so much more severe than suited Mrs Walpole's ideas of hospitality. Perhaps because the lady felt that no such measures would be of any use whatever in really subduing Grace. In this dilemma she turned with some hope and confidence to Isabel, that *she* might in time establish order amongst these unruly M'Ivor children. Mrs Walpole had no fear that the disorder would spread to her own.

But what a task for poor Isabel, coming from a placid home and death-bed, to plunge into and control such wild tumult !

'Well, sister Fanny,' began Mrs Walpole, 'so we have had your old acquaintance, Letty Roger's son here, with his dog, turning the house upside down. I am afraid he must have disturbed even the peace of this room with his uproar. I never saw such a boy. He is unbearable.'

'Indeed, Jane, I did not know what to make of the noise ; but I hope no harm has been done?'

'None of much consequence, I hope too. Your girl's room is in a fine rummage ; but that can be soon set to rights. Isabel, can you leave your mother for a minute ? I want you.'

'What *was* the matter?' she inquired as soon as they

had retired into the dressing-room, 'Where was Grace?—what provoked that bad boy?—However, I need scarcely ask. He would not need much provoking! His mother was always odious, and he is worse, I think. But can you explain it at all?'

'No aunt, I cannot,' replied Isabel, 'I was down stairs when I heard the noise; but before I could get up, uncle William passed me, and I did not attempt to follow him into our room. I came here because I thought mamma might be frightened.'

'And you were right. But how about Grace? I hear that she was hunted out of a *press*! and that a running fight had been going on between her and Roger all the morning; rather a normal state of affairs, I am afraid! Had she been sulking in that press ever since the note? She is a most unaccountable girl—I really do not know what to do with her . . . I cannot let these disturbances go on, indeed I *will have no more* of them. But I do not like to speak myself. Grace seems to have been hurt by the little I said about the note—little enough! and well deserved' (after a pause), 'I believe you are the only person, Isabel, to do any thing, and that you must seriously try your utmost to control your brother and sister. I see no other way! I cannot worry your mother about it. Cannot you speak to both Grace and Roger, and insist upon peace, at any rate, while they remain here? You can take a pleasant message to Roger to begin with,' she added, after another pause, 'you can release him from his room, and tell him that his uncle considered him uncommonly 'plucky' to fly, as he did, upon that disagreeable boy and shake him. Your uncle had all the will to shake Hotspur himself; but *still* such doings *must* not be in our house, and to our guests. Cannot be, Isabel!'

'I will try, aunt,' replied Isabel, 'I will do my best!' she added, in a lower tone.

'Then you will probably succeed,' said her aunt kindly, 'at least I do hope you will!'

Mrs Walpole returned to the next room, and Isabel seated herself upon the sofa. Great was her distress and dismay. The thing she had dreaded had come upon her; an appalling disturbance in this most orderly house, brought about by her brother and sister. And who was to prevent a repetition, and who was to set matters right, but herself, who so dreaded and detested the task. Yet anything was better than that her aunt and Grace should come into collision; or worse still, her mother be worried, and her return spoilt by differences between the families. To apply to her father, Isabel instinctively felt would be worse than useless. On herself must lie the duty, because no one but herself had the remotest chance of success. And what had she!

Hitherto these battles-royal had always driven her out of hearing. Now that she was commissioned to stop them, would either Grace or Roger, Grace especially, hear her, or be ruled. Every attempt that Isabel had hitherto made to express her ready affection for her sister had been gruffly repulsed or coldly discredited, and to authority, Grace was certain to oppose rebellion. Roger might listen to reason and persuasion, but with Grace, Isabel felt powerless.

On the other hand there was her mother's comfort at stake; and she accepted the task without hesitation when she thought of her. Perhaps in this love lay one great tie between herself and Mrs Walpole, who had spent her early life in 'taking care of Fanny.'

Isabel was alone, and for an instant she bent over the

arm of her sofa, and resolutely, earnestly accepted her call to work, craving that guidance and aid that her late aunt had taught her always to seek and rely upon. Then she took her first step, she went to release Roger.





CHAPTER III.

MOTHER O'NEILL.

'Mak' ready, mak' ready, my merry men a'!
Our gude ship sails the morn;
Now ever alake! my master dear,
I fear a deadly storm.'

Old Ballad.



IN the meantime Grace had resorted, after her rapid flight out of the house, to her favourite walk, known as the shrubbery-walk. It skirted the hill, and was hedged on both sides by a double row of thick firs. So that the shade cast by them on the walk within, rendered it very cool in summer, rather damp in winter, and a place handy at all times for retirement or concealment, as the case might require. Both did the child need now, to hide her bitter mortification, and to recover from her cruel fright. In her haste to quit her room, she had not staid to notice her brother's vehement rush upon her persecutor. She had only observed his presence, and had therefore connected him with the offence, not the defence. She fully believed him guilty of bringing Hotspur and his dog to make sport of her in her undignified hiding-place, as in her heart of hearts Grace felt the press had been. And in the turmoil of stormy passions, that

this affair had naturally roused in her mind, it is not perhaps to be wondered at that wrath against her life-long rival, Roger, was the most prominent feeling.

Nor was it unnatural that this wrath took the form of longing for his punishment—if you will, of revenge ! It must be remembered that she felt herself powerless by any lawful means to check his career of determined oppression, powerless unless by the infliction of pain or fright she could make him fear her. Nor had there been anything in her education likely to counteract this painful impotent longing. Her ayah, the only soothing influence, had been all in favour of revenging an injury. Grace well remembered one instance, when the woman had been evil spoken of, and had suffered in consequence, with what perseverance and patience she had sought her revenge ; how full, not to say cruel, that revenge had been, and how she, Grace herself, had triumphed in the triumph of her coloured friend.

So revenge was now Grace's whole thought, and against Roger. Hotspur was worthy of no more anger than his dog. Both Grace believed to be but instruments in her brother's hand, therefore they were beneath her anger. But against him—what at that moment would she not have done !

She stood at one of the many vistas, which, like windows, were cut through the thick fir hedge, all along this walk. At a vista that commanded a sidelong view of the front of the house, and of the wing that contained her own bed-room and Roger's. She was gazing intently at the old tower, situated at the nearest angle of the house, the only bed-room in which she knew Roger was to occupy in a few days, and she trembled with a fierce longing to pay him off, with something like her own misery.

If the devil finds some mischief still for idle hands to

do, he is none the less watchful for those who, by uncurbed passions, fit themselves to become his instruments.

Grace was not the sole occupant of this shrubby walk. A strange woman was also there, observing with much surprise and some sympathy, the marks of hurry and anger that Grace exhibited. She was tall, though bent, perhaps more from care than age ; her complexion was dark, and her eyes, by turns wistfully and fiery, no one who had once seen could forget. That woman plainly had a history in her past.

And indeed there was a dark history connected with mother O'Neill, which did not tend to remove the startling impression made by her appearance ; to uneducated people she was 'half a witch ;' to their betters, one connected with villains, if not herself implicated in their villany.

There she stood, clad in the long red cloak she always wore. And now, while she is watching Grace, we may glance at her history, past and present.

At the time of our story she inhabited a solitary cottage in a wooded glen of the valley. She lived alone. Lonely indeed she was in every respect, in heart, circumstances, and objects of desire. And as for companionship ! why, she was reputed half a witch ; not one of those born healers of human-kind, a white witch ;—but one, whose evil eye might be dangerous, who knew too much of deeds of darkness, who held intercourse at least, at times, with uncanny beings, in uncanny places—yet as a 'dreadful body,' who might neither be mobbed nor ducked, like an ordinary specimen of the species.

Mother O'Neill possessed both husband and sons. But alas ! poor woman, all had perforce left her for a distant land. In her youth she had been the erect and hand-

some daughter of an old family of farmers, a scion of one of those small yeoman households, not uncommon in her county, whose pedigrees, unlike their fortunes, might bear comparison with those of the noblemen around. But life had been hard upon her ; and she never could stem the tide of temptation. Early left alone in her own generation, her mother's vacant place even had been filled by an 'intruder,' who strove in vain to rule her daring step-child.

Then the girl had been allured and conquered against her wrathful parents' orders, and probably against her own better judgment, by an adventurous 'sailoring-man,' who charmed her by his handsome face and bold bearing. At first, indeed, she would have disdained him as a suitor, but she listened to him, and played with him daringly : ere long, she yielded, scorning all beside ; and she left her father's house in direful anger, vowing never to re-enter it, as the pauper he prophesied she would become.

But once married, respectability was beyond her reach. Her good-for-nothing husband never could have retained it, much less won it ! and her ceaseless reproaches soon wore out his careless love. Hapless woman ! the misery became hers to awaken slowly to this most pitiless fact, that her love and fate (for she did love him) had been placed in the hands of one as careless of the treasure as he was unworthy of the charge.

But as this misery dawned upon her, mother O'Neill must have sternly determined to endure it alone, for no one ever heard her confess her mistake. In time she transferred her wounded love to her sons, perhaps with a vehemence that repelled them ; or, perhaps, she tried to force them too, into respectability, for they followed the father into dissipation and crime, and left her another long step lower down in disgrace and loneliness.

At last, one winter's night, the very floodgates of misfortune seemed to open upon her. All the gloomy winter's day the father and three sons had been watching the gathering gale with smothered excitement, which the mother noted well, though she spoke not. As the twilight deepened into night, they all left the cottage for the cliffs, and as the darkness increased, and the gale came howling on, mother O'Neill unable to bear the suspense stole after them. She reached the cliff that overhung the shore behind the valley of the Hall, but it was too dark and stormy to hear or see anything.

Suddenly the glare of a rocket, and the flash and boom of a gun, told of a vessel calling for help and guidance, or driving on that rocky coast.

Some one brushed by her. It was her youngest boy Jem, a lad of fourteen. He bore a small lantern, which he had been waving from the cliff. Its light showed him his mother; and his sudden start and exclamation told her that she was neither expected nor wanted. But with too ready wit, the boy thrust the lantern into her hand, exclaiming: 'Wave it here, mother! between this and yonder bush, that they may see it! I'll down to the shore and help.' And off he dashed down the steep, at the risk of his life.

Had she been a woman of sense and resolution, she would then have dashed the lantern to the ground, rather than have lured that unhappy ship to her destruction. But such she was not. She held on for a few miserable moments, staggering under the storm, and then with the lantern still in her hand, followed the break-neck path of her son. But the purpose of the O'Neills had been effected, even in those few moments. The ship had struck on shore, and was rapidly breaking up; and the father and his sons were

busily appropriating whatever valuables were washed ashore.

Soon a man was floated up a low gully. He had a bag tied round his waist; and just as the mother joined the group, this was being examined. The owner had been left where he lay, and the woman was attracted to his side from pity. There, just as the others were dipping into his gold, she cried out, that he still lived.

What happened next no one can tell. The witness who told this much knew no more. No marks of violence, beyond the bruises that might have resulted from collision with rocks, were afterwards found upon the body. Mother O'Neill could only remember, or would only say, that a fearful wave at that moment came sweeping up and along, rolled over its victim, and caused herself and her family to fly out of its reach.

The tide was coming in rapidly under the pressure of the tremendous wind; lights could be seen in all directions—so the O'Neills deserted the shore, carrying their precious bag and other booty to the shelter of a cave well known to them. The mother perforce accompanied them. She had no choice, though she knew that she was most unwelcome. She thus became the grudging depositary of secrets that she hated and feared to know! and it became necessary to show her still more, even the most secret retreat of her worthless family.

They penetrated to the cavern through its long well-concealed entrance; well within they paused, but the increasing conflux of lights and people close by on the shore, induced them to pass beyond by steps so winding, ill-formed and small, that it would seem impossible for any person ignorant of their existence to find them. By their means they gained a large vault; in fact, one of the old.

dungeons of the castle, and here feeling secure, they proceeded to examine the bag. Mother O'Neill, who had been assisted in her clambering by her favourite boy Jem, stood apart, half 'dazed,' half terrified, during this performance.

But soon steps and voices were again heard, which made it clear that some one had discovered the cavern. How soon might they not follow by the steps! The money was hastily replaced, the bag concealed under a large stone, evidently covering some pit, the lights extinguished, and in darkness and alarm the whole party waited and listened.

Still the voices approached ; so closing noiselessly, by an old stone-door, the opening from the steps, the O'Neills vanished as noiselessly up another flight into the same old tower that now flanked Walpole Hall. Here they first paused to ascertain that the coast was clear before, and to block the way behind them, and then descending the stairs, and stealing out like guilty spirits into the storm, they reached their cottage by diverse routes, Jem still accompanying and guiding his unhappy mother.

But their efforts were in vain. Suspicion pointed them out as wreckers, and within a week all four were safe in jail; even Jem, in spite of his mother's painful efforts to hide or save him. And in due course of time their trial came on, and resulted in variously sentencing the four to transportation. Ere long the day came for mother O'Neill, from her 'free estate,' to visit and take leave of her family in prison.

Alone she went, alone she returned : no one ventured even to offer comfort to that solitary woman, as she trod forth from the prison that enclosed her all. But from that day, the desire was harboured, until it took possession of

her, to regain that treasure, and with it to rejoin them abroad. She made no doubt that there they would soon become free. And in her desolation, relieved from the daily annoyance their conduct had caused her, she brooded over their fate, until she almost succeeded in persuading herself that they were not the hardened, guilty wretches the world considered them ; but persecuted men, with none but her wifely and motherly hand to help them.

Her passionate love was again poured upon them, her as passionate hate upon their judges ; one of whom, Colonel Walpole, had taken his seat upon the magistrates' bench, for the first time, upon Jem's conviction.

But the task of recovering this treasure was not so easy. During the weeks that elapsed between the wreck and the departure of her family, the Walpoles had decided on altering and re-building the Hall, and the tower was filled with workmen. Neither did she feel assured that she could retrace her steps to the vault, so direfully confounding had been the hurry and gloom of her exit. The shore, the cave, and the lower steps offered a far easier and more and more secret path, if only the bolted stone trap door could be opened. And night after night, lantern and tool in hand, she laboured to move it. But where the eager pursuers had failed, she was not likely to succeed, for all the yearning energy she devoted to the task.

She could not find the door at first ; she could not open it when found ; she tried to work round it ;—all in vain ! She was left perfectly undisturbed in her work : she always went at night, and no other person would venture near such a spot after night-fall—how could they ? where the spirit of that bruised drowned man was supposed still to hover by the scene of his misfortune, where his cries might still be heard on the breeze, and the lights of the dead be seen stealing

in and stealing out, or scaling the face of the cliff, where no mortal foot could tread—surely no ‘proper’ person would venture near such an unhallowed spot! and half the evil reputation that mother O’Neill had acquired had been gained by her unholy daring, evidenced by her return from the cliffs just before daybreak, which very early labourers had so often witnessed.

But at length this pursuit of her’s was put an end to, by a landslip in the cavern, which, slight as it was, most effectually blocked up the steps, and all access to them, at least to her. It was evident that this mode of approaching the vault was finally closed for her.

And the tower only remained. But for other reasons this was nearly as unattainable. It was constantly used, not infrequently inhabited, close to the new Hall, indeed almost a part of it, and, moreover, so ‘put to rights’ inside, that without a considerable time for search, mother O’Neill could scarcely hope to find the exit from those stairs. And how to get that time! yet to obtain it, and by its means, her treasure, was the leading object of her life.

How she gained her livelihood no one knew. Sometimes it was supposed by theft, though nothing had been proved against her; sometimes it was supposed by gifts from her distant sons and husband, but nothing certain was known. She became at last universally avoided; no one consorted with her, she lived quite alone, feared superstitiously by many, and disliked by all.

Such was the woman who now approached Grace, who was intently gazing at this same old tower, which stood opposite the wing containing her bed-room and Roger’s.

Generally speaking, the old building had become

nothing but a repository for boxes and household lumber, but it afforded one habitable bed-room, about two-thirds up, which was often occupied when the Hall was full of company. Access to this was gained by a staircase, which ran up inside, and connected several similar, though smaller chambers, on alternate sides. Above this room was the 'empty boxes' loft and the leads, whilst the basement story held all manner of garden litter, tools, matting, etc. One door connected the tower with the conservatory, another opened cornerwise on the vacant space immediately in front of the Hall.

Grace knew that Roger was to sleep in this tower in a few days ; perhaps when he was there alone, she vaguely thought, in the fury of her passion, she might be able to punish him, to make him feel her anger ; certainly, in the long passage indoors, 'where no noise might be made,' she could do nothing. She had very little idea indeed what she wished to do. Surely a sense of impotence, mingled with such anger as hers, is about the most infuriating that can be experienced.

'That's a strange old tower,' began an unexpected voice at her side.

'What!' cried the startled girl, turning upon the speaker, but at once appeased by a strong likeness between the mother and her own ayah. The woman continued :

'A Baron Walpole built it, many hundred years ago, for his wife. They say she was crazed by the fear of him. He was a dark hard man, fit for the name he bore !' exclaimed the woman, with extreme bitterness, 'and she was out of his way there. She soon died——.'

'But I've heard an uglier tale still of that tower. Another lady, while he lived, died there too. And she was as beautiful and gentle as the daybreak, though she was

a Walpole. She was his only child, the daughter of his dead wife. He had bid her marry another Baron, fit to be his mate, not her's, as old as himself, and as hard. But the lady refused, and so angered her father; all the days of prayer and nights of weeping that she spent, poor thing, in trying to soften him, were so much wasted breath. Those two strong men bent her will between them, and the day was fixed for the wedding. The Baron came on its eve, he that was to wed her on the morrow, and again she strove to move her father with piteous tears, but he fiercely bade her obey him.'

'Did she? I wouldn't!' cried Grace.

'Aye, she was a gentle-spirited lady, she ceased to beg; but when the guests were all a feasting, for the castle on the hill was full of men and masters, the cry was suddenly raised, that she had fled. They sought her all over the castle and round it, but sought in vain—she was gone. Then cursing and raging, these two bold Barons mounted their horses, and with dogs and men set off in search. It was raining and blowing as if the fiends had been set loose; an awful night for the poor lady to be abroad in. But the storm and her woe were alike to them—nothing. They found her soon, in a marsh, cowering under some bushes, soaked through, and half dead with cold and terror. She clung fainting to her father, but the stony-hearted villain lifted her up behind *his* horse—the bridegroom, the man whom she loathed, and so she was brought back to the castle. Her father shut her up that night alone in the tower, swearing that she should never come out but to wed or to die.'

'In that very tower?' asked Grace.

'Yes. But on the next night, in the dead of the night, she thought she heard the steps of the bridegroom Baron

coming, clank, clank, clank, up the stairs, and she fled before the sound to the top of the tower, and then threw herself over.'

'Did she kill herself?' inquired Grace, anxiously.

'Yes! It is said she still walks,' added the woman, looking wistfully at the tower.

'But why could her father want her to marry that bad man? and *why* did he want to have her?' inquired Grace.

'They say her father was bound to him in some way; but that, anyhow, their lands were together, and they wanted to join them. But there's a darker tale for him,—the husband. They say she'd refused his only son, who loved her so madly, that he pined and died, and that the wicked Baron swore to be revenged, by marrying her himself, whether she would or no. He was determined to have her, but he did not! He did not even get her poor body. That lies buried in the church yonder. You may see her tomb there.'

'What! the lady lying by the church-door as we go in?'

'That is the lady Amy's tomb. It was a woful wicked deed,' exclaimed the woman, 'to punish her so because she could not love his son!'

'But he did punish her though!' cried Grace, with a fierceness of passion that quite startled her companion. It was as if the *word* had echoed in her memory. Poor child! it was piteous that she could thus sympathize with him.

Mother O'Neill glanced round in astonishment to see what could thus have roused the girl; and she saw Roger and Tom merrily racing away on their ponies down the

drive and away. Doubtless the sight had recalled Grace to the memory of her wrongs, and reawakened the furious desires which otherwise the tale of the lady Amy might have dissipated.

Mother O'Neill's thoughts had been wandering from her tale ; but Grace's words and manner at once rivetted her attention. She had been struck by her evident passion ; she had observed Grace glance at the boys on their ponies ; she knew that the Hall must soon be overflowing, if the Christmas guests were asked, when probably these very boys would occupy the tower's only bed-room—if Grace were wroth with and wanted to punish them, she might be glad of assistance. Could the mother herself assist, and so gain the entrance for which she longed !—There was just a chance, but how to secure it ? Grace made no offer again to speak, as she scowlingly watched the boys out of sight. And if the mother spoke first, it might spoil all ; or, if she was silent, the chance might pass by ! Mother O'Neill's breath came short and quick ; so near the chance seemed, so fair the hope (the wicked hope !), how could she secure it ?

'They never can have hurt you?' she whispered at length, pointing to the distant boys.

'*He* has,' faltered Grace hoarsely, '*He* always will ! Roger.'

'How ? can't we stop him ?'

The tone of sympathy was bewitching, the hope of protection, of gratifying her passion, was too bewitching ; in another minute mother O'Neill was in possession of her story of Hotspur's cruelty, urged on, Grace believed, by Roger, of her grudge against the latter, and of her wild desire to punish him soon and sufficiently. And mother O'Neill was cautiously hinting at the use of the tower for

the purpose, and of giving her own ready help, when another person appeared on the scene, and cut short the conference.

This was none other than Grace's especial abhorrence, Nurse Thirswell. She was returning with all the small M'Ivors from a walk, for which she had in vain sought Miss Grace. Now here she was, talking to a bold bad woman.

'My gracious goodness, Miss Grace,' screamed nurse, 'I am sure I can't be answerable for you to your mamma, if you go picking up all sorts of odd people, who aint no acquaintance at all fit for young ladies ! no acquaintance at all,' repeated she, fixing on mother O'Neill a stare of dislike and disdain, which the latter returned with a gaze of defiance and contempt.

Grace was startled into sullen silence, which was indeed her usual weapon of defence. But perhaps this sudden apparition of nurse had surprised her into the consciousness that she was doing and saying what neither mother, nor father, nor sister, nor aunt, could approve of. But there was no need for her to speak ! The mother and nurse had too much to say to each other ; and for some minutes they filled the air with it all, neither paying the slightest heed to her opponent, until at last mother O'Neill remembered that she might peril her own schemes by abusing this nurse ; so, gathering her red cloak about her, she stalked deliberately down the path, and disappeared into the road beyond.

Then nurse turned to begin upon Miss Grace, but she too was gone ! she had taken advantage of the clatter between the women to slip away, and make off home. Mrs Thirswell hurried after her, as fast as the train of children with her would allow, and took every opportunity,

favourable or unfavourable, all the rest of the evening, to din into Grace's ears how unmanageable she was!—how unlike every good child, and Roger in particular!—thereby increasing Grace's irritation, and effectually destroying any feelings of compunction, that perhaps might otherwise have visited her.





CHAPTER IV.

FIRST ENDEAVOURS.

'Build to-day, then, strong and sure,
On a firm and ample base ;
And ascending and secure
Shall to-morrow find its place.'

Longfellow.



SABEL, as we have said, left the dressing-room to seek Roger, and release him from his confinement. She found him in the middle of the floor, seated astride on the legs of an overturned chair, and 'letting off' his wrath and impatience, by digging one heel after another against its top. The sight of him almost dispelled the gravity with which she had started upon her mission.

'Roger !' she exclaimed, 'you are free, you may go !'

'And what was I ever shut up for ?' inquired he. 'Was Hotspur to worry my sister as he pleased ?'

'No, certainly not. Uncle William thought you a bold plucky boy. But you know, Hotspur was in his house ; he felt obliged to protect his guest, and if you had not been sent here, you might have met him again.'

'Ah well ! he'll be here next week, and won't I kick him then !' digging his heel at the chair.

‘But that’s exactly what you must not do!’ cried Isabel. ‘Aunt Jane has been talking very seriously to me, and she positively forbids such disputes for the future, especially to a guest.’

‘Then she shouldn’t have such guests,’ retorted Roger, rising from his perch. ‘I *can’t*, and I *won’t*, help kicking fellows like that.’

‘It must be very tempting,’ she replied; ‘but, indeed, most seriously, you must avoid disputes here; and it is not only with Hotspur,’ continued Isabel, anxious to finish her message, particularly as she observed Roger’s thoughts turning towards his gaiters.

‘I am going my ride,’ explained the boy. ‘What else?’

‘With Grace—you know, you were teasing Grace before Hotspur came.’

‘What nonsense!’ cried Roger, with a gaiter in each hand, ‘bosh! I was peeping at and bothering Grace; that’s not a bit like setting a dog at her.’

‘No—but Roger! that teasing and bothering does great mischief—it makes Grace so frightfully angry—,’ but the boy’s toss of impatient contempt made the lecturer falter.

‘It does her a world of good, then, instead of harm. And she is too good fun,’ added he, laughing at the remembrance—‘but I shall be late for my ride if I don’t be quick. Do you know where uncle and Tom are?’

Isabel did not answer, but stood silently at the window. So Roger peeped round her shoulder to see what she was thinking of, as soon as his gaiters were safely on, and observing how very grave she looked, he slipped his arm round her waist, repeating: ‘It does her good, now, Isabel!’

‘I don’t believe it,’ replied Isabel, ‘she gets frightfully angry!’

'Well—but she ought not to be so cross.'

'I am afraid you are a poor help to make her more good-tempered or happy!—I believe you do her much mischief, but whether you do or not, aunt Jane forbids most positively such a continuance of quarrelling here, and bid me speak to you, and try and control Grace. Poor girl, what chance have I unless you will cease provoking her?'

'You are going to manage Grace! H— — o! whistled her disrespectful brother. 'Aunt had much better have asked *me*. You need not smile so, now, Isabel! That same teasing does manage her, when nothing else will. She hates it so, that she will be quiet to avoid it. You dont know Grace, and I do.'

'I am certain that it does nothing but harm,' replied Isabel.

'And *what* do you mean to do?— WELL?'

But Isabel was obliged to confess that she did not know!

'Nor any body else. Now, I tell you that I do know. Listen here. Nurse bullies shamefully, and Grace sulks or storms, but never does a thing she can help. Papa scolds, and Grace gets out of his sight. I am always after her, and I tease, and she does mind me. I can get her out walking, or to dinner, or to bed quietly, when no one else can. You cannot, no one can manage Grace unless she's a bit afraid of them.'

'But it has not at all answered,' repeated Isabel. 'It cannot make her love you.'

'My goodness! no—I believe she hates me!'

'Roger, Roger!' cried his sister.

'Well—but—I suppose she always has,' said Roger. 'Nurse managed that before we were born, almost,'

and his tone implied that he could not conceive a change.

Isabel was silent. She retained his hand in her's ; but how could she utter to him all the feelings that this proof of exceeding carelessness occasioned ? It made her heart ache for both brother and sister.

'Or,' continued he, 'if you won't trust me,—trust aunt Walpole, trust Grace to her. You cannot frighten Grace. You, dear soft old thing, how in the world could anybody be afraid of you ? Grace minds nobody who does not frighten her or fight her, and you can do neither. Aunt Walpole can rule people quite quietly—so Grace must give in to her in time. Isabel, you are no good at all, *none-at-all* ! But, bother Grace, and Hotspur, and you, I shant get any ride to-day. Isabel, don't look so glum !'

'I am not glum,' said Isabel, smiling, 'but you won't tease, Roger !'

'Yes ! No—perhaps I won't—I won't promise though !'

He did not stop to inquire whose influence was detaining him there ! nor did his sister ; but still stopping, he began again :

'What's the good of your plaguing yourself ? What—do—you—mean—to—do ?—I tell you what, you might as well try to manage uncle's mad black pony as Grace in her tantrums, just as well—give it up Isabel ! ah well,' he added, as she shook her head, 'you can do as you please, of course ; its not my fault if you get kicked !' and with some annoyance in his manner, he swung himself out of the room.

Isabel's next task was to seek Grace ; but in this attempt she was, as the reader will know, frustrated. Grace was not at home, nor did any one know where to find her. Isabel did not try to do so. She felt sure Grace would

resent anything that looked like spying upon her actions, and would shut herself up impenetrably against all the sympathy and warning that Isabel was longing, though dreading, to give her.

Failing in this attempt, therefore, Isabel carried her work into the library, and sat down to ponder over Roger's advice :—' Grace minds no one whom she does not fear ; and nobody fears you ! leave her to aunt.'

How heartily would she have rejoiced not to interfere ! of course no one feared a shy timid girl like herself—ought she to become more awful ? and if so, how on earth was she to set about it ? She almost laughed at the impossibility of making a dragoon of herself, or an ' Aunt Jane,' almost as awful a being to some people, and yet what was to be done ?

One thing was quite clear. Leave Grace to her aunt she would not, could not, without severely paining her mother. Besides, she had promised, and she must do what she could. And suddenly those words struck upon a chord of memory, that brought strength to Isabel. How often, in failing strength, in keen suffering, had her beloved aunt used them ?

' He expects imperfection and short-coming, Isabel !' she would say. ' The poor widow gave only two mites ; but she " did what she could," and God gave the increase. I cannot do all I would, but I may—all I can ; and I will try, God helping me.'

' And so will I !' exclaimed Isabel to herself, ' besides, there may be some influence that will control Grace besides fear.'

But her cogitations were interrupted by a trampling of little feet outside the door. It was soon opened, and a troop of little people entered. At first very orderly,—for

fear aunt Jane might be there, and she 'likes us to come in properly, you know,' said one of the party. But when they found it was 'only Isabel,' the order was gone in a minute, and hurrying and pushing along, the bairns found themselves around the girl—on her lap—at her feet—inside her chair—or astride on its back, five or six clustered round her in a minute, cousins, and brothers, and sisters ; 'nobody can fear you, you know, Issy,' said brother Roger ! True enough it was, and Issy could not find it in her heart to be sorry—she soon made room for bonnie Neddy M'Ivor behind her, and began riding little Mary on her knee—to the old song :

' There was an old woman, as I've heard tell !
And she went to the market, her apples for to sell—'

' Eggs, Issy, eggs, eggs,' clamoured Polly, ' it was *not* apples !'

' Well, eggs—then.'

' And she went to the market, her eggs for to sell.'

' And there was a tailor, whose name was Stout,
And he cut her petticoats all round about !'

bellowed Billy, astride on the back of Isabel's chair ; where, however, he rode with such vehemence as threatened to overbalance her weight and Neddy's inside.

' Where have you all been,' inquired Isabel.

' Oh, we looked for you every where, said Billy, wanting to get you out with us. But nurse Crosspatch would not wait any longer.'

' Hush, Billy my dear !' said Isabel.

' Oh ! but you wouldn't have said 'hush' if you'd seen her in the shrubbery, then ! she was in such a rage—my

goodness—why, I'd have run away if it had been at me ! but as it wasn't, it was rather good fun. How she did scold ! and how red she did get.'

'And so did the old woman too,' said another little voice, 'as red as her cloak.'

'I really do believe nurse stamped said little Edward, very slowly, out of the chair.

'Nonsense Teddy,' exclaimed several voices.

'It is impossible, Teddy love,' said Isabel, leaning over the little fellow. 'Nurse never could stamp,—it is only babies that stamp.'

'Then nurse is a baby, for she did stamp. I saw her, and she'd have put me in the corner, if I had been so angry.'

'My dears,' began Isabel, 'tell me something pretty. I am tired of all this.'

But before anything pretty could be begun, Clara, the second girl of the Walpoles, whispered into Isabel's ear : 'But, indeed, cousin, Teddy is quite right. Nurse did stamp several times. She was very very angry indeed. I was quite glad Grace ran away.'

'And so was I,' exclaimed Billy, catching the last words, 'nurse does scold Grace so dreadfully, it's too bad.'

'Grace !' said Isabel, 'was nurse angry with Grace ?'

'No, no,' answered Billy, 'with old mother O'Neill. But Grace was close by when the row began. She had been talking to mother O'Neill for ever so long, two or three hours, I should think.'

'Billy ! why, we saw the old mother go into the shrubbery.'

'When we went for our walk, Clara, and Grace was there then, because I saw her, only I would not tell nurse ; and they were talking when we came back, and that was a good hour, I know, if not two or three.'

‘What could Grace have had to say to mother O’Neill all that time,’ wondered Clara. ‘Why we must not speak to her!’

‘I wonder too,’ replied Billy. ‘Do you know, Issy?’

‘Not at all,’ answered Isabel. ‘Is Grace come home, do you know?’

‘Oh yes. She cut away while nurse and the old mother were scolding at each other. My! how they did scold! and after all mother O’Neill took plenty of time to wrap her cloak about her, and walk away as if she didn’t mind it a bit. I should like to mind nurse as little as that, I know!’

‘Then you would be a very naughty boy,’ said little Miss Mary, from her sister’s lap, ‘as naughty as Grace.’

‘Grace is not naughty! Mary, Mary, you must not say such things. I shall put you off my lap if you do,’ exclaimed Isabel, indignantly.

‘Indeed! you should hear what nurse says,’ said Billy.

‘And really, really, sister,’ said little Mary, ‘Grace is very naughty indeed always; nurse says so, she does really.’

‘Nurse ought to be ashamed of herself,’ said Isabel.

‘I’ll tell her so,’ cried Billy. ‘I think so very often, and I’d like to say so, when she is so cross to Grace, and often at other times too; only she gives us dry bread, and locks us in the closet when we are rude.’

Clara said nothing, but she looked so grave and full of meaning, that Isabel, who had displaced the little Mary, and risen from her seat, was much tempted to question her. But a moment’s thought told her, that this at least was not the time to do so. She was not sorry that the sound of the half-past five gong summoned her to dress for dinner, and all the little ones to tea.

Isabel repaired first to her mother’s room for a short time.

There she met her aunt, but of course there nothing on the subject uppermost in Isabel's thoughts passed between them. Mrs Walpole could well believe that more caution was needful in this case, than she could have used in any. But when Isabel reached the door of her own room, whither she was going to dress for dinner, she was arrested by a voice that portended nothing pleasant.

'If you please, Miss M'Ivor, may I be allowed to speak a few words with you?' said nurse Thirswell.

Isabel turned. Close by stood Mrs Thirswell erect, a very model of stateliness. With colour fixed, and indignant eyes, she began immediately.

'Master William, ma'am, has been pleased to say that you are ashamed of me ! may I ask, ma'am, why ? I'm sure I've done my duty to the best of my poor abilities, ma'am. Very poor they are, ma'am, I'm free to acknowledge. But if I don't give satisfaction, ma'am, I'm quite ready to go ; though what the poor children would do with no one to care for them, ma'am, it passes me to tell ; as for poor missus, every one knows she's naught !'

Isabel was considerably awed and alarmed by the beginning of this address, but most fortunately her manner did not betray it. She appeared perfectly self-possessed, and these last words roused her real wrath.

'Thirswell !' she exclaimed, 'you are speaking of *my* mother and *your* mistress.'

'Well, to be sure, ma'am, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean, to be sure, anything disrespectful. But to be told by Master William that I ought to be ashamed of myself, that did hurt my feelings.'

'Master William ought not to have said so, nurse,' replied Isabel, 'but what occasioned my saying it, was the extremely unkind manner in which the children spoke of

my sister Grace. They ought not to have heard her——.'

'I am sure, ma'am,' burst in nurse Thirswell, fairly off on another and a very real grievance. 'I am certain sure if you know'd the way that Miss Grace goes on, you would not be for taking her part now, Miss Isabel! There is not a naughtier child in creation, I do declare, than Miss Grace. Why, I caught her to-night a'talking to the worst old woman in the parish, the most audacious woman,' exclaimed Mrs Thirswell, warming with the remembrance of her wrongs, 'as dared to tell me, *me*, that I was a hired menial;—indeed! And Miss Grace, ma'am, as good as gave me to understand, when I spoke to her about keeping company with such people, that she'd speak to who she liked, when she liked, and as long as she liked. If that aint being naughty, I'm sure I don't know what is!'

'I am grieved that Grace is so rebellious,' sighed Isabel. 'But nurse, it is of the utmost consequence that no quarrels should take place here, and I must depend upon your doing your utmost to prevent them. I must insist,' added the girl, with an assumption of authority that equally surprised herself and nurse, 'that the children do not hear Miss Grace spoken of in the manner she must have been, for them to speak so to me to-day. You must remember this, Thirswell, both for my mother's sake and my aunt's.'

The appearance of the latter lady, issuing from Mrs M'Ivor's room, put a stop to the interview, and added immense weight to Isabel's words. Nurse disappeared into her nursery, much impressed and astonished.

Mrs Walpole, on her part, was extremely amused, though somewhat struck, with the firm look and bearing of 'pretty little Issy.' She seemed to have grown two inches taller, at least, and as she turned to her aunt, with natural

courtesy, Isabel met with a smile of such cordial approval and kindness, that it gave her real delight. Nurse caught sight of it too. And it sealed Miss M'Ivor's authority as something real, and to be attended to, in a manner amazing to Mrs Thirswell.

But Isabel retired from the battle, exhausted by her own victory. So tired, that do what she would, the tears would come, and flow for a few minutes freely. They did her a 'power of good,' however, as Mrs Thirswell would have said, and enabled her to anticipate the meeting with Grace, with more courage than she had felt all the afternoon.

She was nearly dressed when Grace appeared ; and as the latter had not begun to dress, and it wanted but a few minutes to the dinner hour, Isabel offered to assist her, hoping that some opportunity might thus occur to soften the unpleasant message she had to deliver.

But Grace submitted in sullen silence ; nor could all the winning, the almost supplicating tenderness of Isabel's manner, persuade her to utter one unnecessary word. Mrs Thirswell had been 'at her' ever since the walk, too effectually to leave a crumb of good temper in Grace's heart. She had returned from her attack upon Isabel, by no means well disposed towards the children ; and, 'Master William didn't ought to have said any such thing,' and 'Miss Grace was very wrong indeed, Miss M'Ivor said so,' were all the results they heard of the interview.

Grace, therefore, felt as if Isabel was to be another authority over her, in company with aunt Walpole and nurse Thirswell, against both of whom she was quite inclined to rebel. That Isabel could have any influence or authority on her own account, Grace had yet to learn.

Therefore poor Isabel's earnest efforts to express the pity and love she felt for her oppressed and naughty sister, were cast back with repulsive sullenness.

In the meantime the hour was hastening on. The gong would shortly sound, and the message was still undelivered. Isabel's courage was fast ebbing away. But she rallied it with a great effort, and began :

'Grace, dear, I was very sorry to hear all that noise in this room to-day !'

No answer.

'It was so near mamma's room, I was afraid it would disturb her !'

No answer.

'What was it about? It was not your fault altogether, was it?'

Still no answer.

'Perhaps not at all—that Hotspur seems a horrid boy. I cannot think how the dog got here? Do you know?—no? I suppose not. You were in the press.—Grace! what could make you get in there !' exclaimed Isabel, really provoked at her continued silence.

Here the gong sounded long and loud, and Grace turned with a sullen shake to go. But Isabel felt this must not be. She caught her arm, and holding her firmly, but gently, she said, in a clear voice :

'Grace, dear, I am very sorry, but aunt Walpole bid me tell you and Roger that such a noise must not be made again, nor such perpetual quarrels take place in this house; she told me to say this! But she will tell you herself, if need be. Oh Grace, don't let this happen, for mamma's sake !'

But Grace roughly swung herself loose, and there was no time for more talk. Both girls hurried down stairs ;

Isabel feeling more hopeless and weary than ever, and Grace quite as miserable and utterly cross.

‘How could she help Hotspur’s noise and Roger’s teasing, not to say almost treachery now ! Why was she to be scolded !’

And there *was* truth in the thought.





CHAPTER V.

A DISASTROUS CONCLUSION.

‘Be still, sad heart ! and cease repining ;
‘Behind the clouds is the sun still shining.’

Longfellow.



WHEN all the ‘company’ were assembled, the dining-room contained, besides the master and mistress of the house, and Major M’Ivor, Isabel, Grace and Roger of the M’Ivors, and Amy and Tom of the Walpoles.

Tom and Roger had succeeded in getting a good ride, though but a short one, out of the remainder of the afternoon, and when it grew too dark for out-door amusement, they had betaken themselves to Colonel Walpole’s carpenter’s room, where any boy might do what he pleased with the tools, provided he was reasonably careful. And as they had succeeded, beyond their expectations, in some turning they attempted, they were in capital spirits. The troubles of the day were too far in the past to cloud the memory of either boy. Tom had nothing to do with them, therefore their result in banishing Hotspur was pure joy to him. Roger had rather gained credit than otherwise

for pluck, he had had the satisfaction of thoroughly 'trouncing' his opponent, and as for his sister Grace, he was too much accustomed to see her in a fury to be over much concerned about it!

He had been, it is true, much chagrined by Isabel's distrust, even disapproval, of his successful 'management' of Grace. But his self-love was restored to its usual state, by the sight of his two sisters at dinner. Whatever might be in store for the future, it was sufficiently clear that Isabel had disastrously failed in the present. It would be seen, he felt sure, after all, that he only could manage Grace. Poor little maiden! it was fortunate for her that another than he intended to try.

A spirit of triumphant perversity seemed to take possession of him; of course all dinner-time the conversation was apt to fall upon just those subjects calculated to prolong the *topsy-turvey* state of Grace's temper: and whenever this was the case, Roger (Isabel would not believe intentionally) hit upon just what he had better not have said, and then picked himself off his blunders with such injurious haste, that he kept his sisters on thorns all the dinner through, and at last drove matters too far, even for him: for they threatened to become serious.

Mother O'Neill had been mentioned several times already—and her name always acted like a 'red flag' to Colonel Walpole—when an inquiry from Isabel, as to how the boys enjoyed their ride, elicited the fact, that they had nearly ridden over mother O'Niell, by jumping a hedge, just as she passed by it.

'I thought we should have been upon her,' cried Tom, 'and how savage she did look!'

'Where was she?' inquired the Colonel, hastily. 'I hate having that woman about.'

‘Just leaving the shrubbery walk for the road,’ responded Tom.

‘What could she be doing there ! I am sure she will do us serious mischief some of these days. Does any one know how she came there ?’

‘Grace could tell, she’s her acquaintance !’ then, catching Isabel’s flush of pain, and really wishing to recall his words : ‘I’m sure I don’t know !’ cried Roger.

‘Grace !’ said her uncle, almost imperiously. ‘You do not know that disreputable woman ?——where DID you meet her ?’ he demanded.

Then as no answer came to either question :—

‘Speak ! my dear Grace,’ said aunt Walpole, ‘you would not know what a bad person she is. There need be nothing wrong in your speaking to her.’

But Grace’s conscience could scarcely accept this as true. Every motive kept her silent.

‘Indeed, Jane, I do not agree with you,’ said her husband. ‘I most positively forbid any of my family holding intercourse with that bad woman, unless you or I know all about it. You will have the kindness to remember this, though you have not the common civility to answer me, Grace ! You must excuse my speaking so sharply, M’Ivor,’ he added, suddenly remembering that he had not been addressing his own child, ‘but I have every reason to think very ill of this woman, very ill indeed.’

‘Of course,’ replied the Major. ‘Grace ! why in the world don’t you answer your uncle. Upon my word you are a most remarkable girl. I am quite ashamed of you.’

Scarcely so agitated as her sister, Grace yet, of necessity, now maintained her silence. And the subject dropped, only, however, to be renewed when the younger children

came in for dessert. Two such events did not happen every day, as the 'row with the dog' indoors, and that with nurse out of doors. It would have been too marvellous if the children had held their tongues about them. Certainly they did not.

At length Mrs Walpole began to perceive and sympathize with Isabel's increasing distress: on Billy recommencing, therefore, the obnoxious subject, she suddenly signed to her niece, and laughingly left the room. For her indignation now soothed, she found Grace's perversity so exceedingly grotesque, that it almost provoked her to laugh.

Isabel most thankfully followed.

And as Roger opened the door for them, he whispered, as she passed: 'I was so sorry, Isabel, just at last, I was indeed—to vex you,' he added, noticing how pained she looked.

'Yes, dear, I am sure you are. Thank you,' was her kind reply.

Oh! did he not feel ashamed of himself! He let Grace pass without one remark; whereas, under other circumstances, he would probably have bestowed a peremptory order upon her, which she would have certainly disobeyed, if she dared.

Their aunt waited for Isabel in the hall, and twined her arm in her's, as they passed on to the drawing-room. Isabel thought her kinder than ever, and in truth Mrs Walpole's esteem and affection were rapidly increasing. Still there remained the painful difficulty, what could she do to control her wayward sister, who seemed so determined to irritate everybody?

Mrs Walpole withdrew, as she approached the ample fire-place, in which a glorious Christmas fire was blazing, to set the younger ones off at some game, and to provide, if

she could, for Grace and Amy. Grace would have escaped from her companions in the hall, had not the detested apparition of Mrs Thirswell, waiting to carry a young M'Ivor up to bed, driven her, as a more agreeable alternative, to follow them. Amy at once laid hands upon her, and hurried her to a table strewn with several of Mrs M'Ivor's Indian sketches, which she wanted Grace to explain to her. The two girls were soon fully occupied. One familiar scene after another was turned over, to Grace's great pleasure. She almost forgot her English troubles in talking these pictures over to Amy, who listened with keen interest to her glowing description of scenes and events so unlike anything she herself had known. India had been by no means the elysium that Grace now fancied it. But she certainly had been under less control there, and had valued the love of her dear ayah far more than she knew, until she had been forced to part from her, and had been consigned to the unloving care of nurse Thirswell.

Before long she and Amy came to the sketch of an ayah, and it was Grace's old friend ! Grace's smothered exclamation of regret and affection attracted Amy's attention.

'Why ! Grace,' she cried. 'That is mother O'Neill in Indian clothes. Who could have drawn her ?'

'It is *not* ! it is my own mammy, my own dear mammy, my dear, dear mammy,' exclaimed poor little Gracey, as hanging over the sketch, she burst into tears. 'I wish I were with her ! oh, I wish I were with her !' she cried.

Grace's tears of sorrow were rarely loud tears. They flowed like grown persons', without noise, so that Amy alone was aware of her present emotion.

Amy put her arm round her, trying to soothe her ; and

at length succeeded in helping Grace to recover herself, but not until the tears had considerably blurred more than one of the sketches before her. Grace observed this, and tried to wipe them off, with very bad effect.

Poor little maidens ! Both knew that the sketches were highly prized by Grace's father, and it was miserable work to incur his displeasure a second time so soon.

'We can tell him how it was,' said Amy. 'I will tell, if you like, Grace dear?'

'No, no !' cried the other, 'tell him anything, but don't say why—don't say why, Amy ! I'll never speak to you if you do—hush—here he comes !'

And as she spoke, both Colonel Walpole and the Major, with their two sons, entered the room. Grace immediately stole nearer the door, with the intention of slipping out of the room. But in this she was prevented by the entrance of the servants with tea, and by Roger and Tom seating themselves at an intervening table for a game of draughts. She was therefore compelled to seek shelter in a large arm-chair, which pretty well concealed her from view.

Colonel Walpole approached his wife. His object was to persuade her to sing. Mrs Walpole possessed a rich contralto voice, well-cultivated, and much of the pleasure in the evenings at Walpole Hall, consisted in the sweet music that her voice and Isabel's made, in the duets they sang together. Isabel's was not educated like her aunt's, but her ear was good, and her taste and feeling even better. It was the delight of the boys and the gentlemen to listen to the songs of these two.

Yet, perhaps, even they did not enjoy them as Grace did. Nothing could soothe her, or drive the naughtiness out of her, like a song of Isabel's. She had often crept close behind the singer, afraid by a movement to disturb

her, and drank in, so to speak, the sounds she loved. But like all Grace's deep joys or sorrows, the more they hurt or gratified her, the more closely she concealed them. Isabel had no idea of the pleasure she could thus give Grace.

Grace, from her arm-chair, noticed her uncle's movement, and prepared herself to enjoy the coming song. She turned to discover where Isabel was, and observed her standing by the fire, leaning against the mantle-piece. Her attitude was extremely graceful. Her slight figure was well set off by a dark, tightly-fitting dress, whilst the rich glow of the firelight lit up brightly the masses of her wavy chestnut hair.

Grace's taste was satisfied entirely, as she gazed at her, and a soothing remembrance of Isabel's winning kindness to herself arose in her mind. But alas ! with it came a bitter remembrance of her own churlishness. She began to feel how far superior Isabel was to her cross little self, and a longing dawned in her mind for her approval and love. Perhaps some other influence than that of fear was beginning to have power over 'little Gracey.'

Mrs Walpole had also been observing her niece with pleasure. But she now arose to open the piano, and touched Isabel as she passed, to summon her to join in the song. Isabel instantly moved ; but as she left the fireplace, Grace observed that she put her handkerchief to her eyes, as if to wipe them. Could *she* be sorrowing ! Grace was much moved at the thought. It was not possible—and yet—?

The song began ; but the poor child was not destined to hear it. Amy had courageously remained near the sketches to shelter her cousin, as far as she could, if any one found fault. But Major M'Ivor soon discovered the

blots, which Amy was too honest to hide, and angrily demanded, who had made them ?

Amy said : ' Grace—but she could not help it—indeed—she was very unhappy—.'

' Unhappy ! tush and folly !' shouted the Major, ' could not she be unhappy away from my sketches ? Grace, how dare you !' he cried, ' Come here at once.'

But Grace stuck close to her chair ;—and the Major, striding up to her, took her by the shoulder, and turning her out of the room, sent her roughly up to bed.

Isabel's voice altogether refused to sing after this, and her aunt kindly chose solo songs to shelter her.

It sometimes happens when the heavens are overclouded with storms, that one bright glimpse of blue will peep through all, and attract the eye from the gloom surrounding it, to its own tender exceeding beauty. Such a glimpse of hope now came to Grace.

She went to bed that night almost blinded by the distress that enwrapped her. Exhausted at length, she was falling asleep, when a gentle hand smoothed her pillow, soothingly tucked her in, and a soft cheek rested for a moment upon her's, and a kind voice murmured : ' Asleep ! poor dear ! O ! that I could help her in some way !'

All amazement, Grace remained motionless. But when her sister passed on to prepare for bed, Grace just peeped out of one eye to make sure it was Isabel, and then went to sleep, thinking more of that gladdening bit of love than of all the clouds around her.

And now that Isabel has retired to rest, believing the day an utter failure, let us sum up its results, the reward of her simply doing her best as events passed on. Her loyal assumption of her task had both soothed her aunt and

sheltered Mrs M'Ivor. Nurse Thirswell and Roger must surely pause in their injustice and tyranny, knowing that Isabel's authority and influence would both be extended to protect her sister. While to Grace herself, who can measure the blessing of a dawning hope !

It had not been a day thrown away.





CHAPTER VI.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

‘ Rise happy morn, rise holy morn,
Draw forth the cheerful day from night ;
O Father, touch the East, and light
The Light that shone when Hope was born.’

Tennyson.



CHRISTMAS morning rose in beauty. A heavy fall of snow had taken place all the previous evening and during half the night. It was followed by a sharp frost, but without wind and a clear sky. The sparkle of the frozen snow, that hung from the trees, as the sun shone through them, and the dazzling brilliancy of the snow on the ground, attracted the wonder and delight of the little Indian children, to whom it was altogether a new sight.

‘ Look, Clara !’ exclaimed Billy, as his cousin entered their nursery. ‘ Did you ever see anything like it ! all so white and bright and soft !’

‘ Is it sugar, Clara ?’ asked little Mary, ‘ that the fairies have been sprinkling all night ? May not we go and see ? nurse won’t let us !’ and Mary pushed her head close, as if she would poke it through the glass.

‘O! you never can go out, Mary dear!’ said patronising little Clara, ‘you would get so wet and cold, and it is not a bit like sugar.’

‘What is it then?’ cried Billy. ‘Oh, here comes Isabel, she’ll tell us all about it.’

‘Good morning! good morning. Merry Christmas! merry Christmas to you all: and to you, nurse,’ added Isabel, forgetting for the moment the interview she had with her on the previous afternoon, and her own wonder what they should say to each other, when next they met!

‘The same to you, ma’am, I’m sure: and a happy New Year, and many of them,’ responded nurse, graciously.

‘Merry Christmas, Isabel,’ returned the children. ‘Do come and look at the snow.’

‘Meddy Kismus! meddy Kismus,’ lisped the baby, holding out its arms to its sister from nurse’s lap, where it was sitting half dressed.

‘Bless you, my darling,’ exclaimed Isabel, kneeling down close by, and delighting nurse’s heart by giving the child a hearty kiss.

‘Come! and look at the snow, Issy! do come. Is it sugar? what is it? may we get some? may we run out and get some? do come, Issy!’

‘Well—I’m coming! I’m coming! run out? No. It is very deep, Billy. Just look at James going round the house. Look! it is nearly up to his ankles.’

‘Why, so it is,’ said Billy; ‘and there goes Amy’s dog. Look at him! hopping along.’

‘What is James going to do?’ asked Mary.

‘Sweep a path for us to go to church, I imagine,’ replied Isabel. ‘There—he is brushing now.’

‘And making the snow so dirty. Naughty James,’

exclaimed the little girl. 'O! Isabel, just look how dirty he is making it.'

'I should like to get some snow somehow,' said Billy.

'Isabel, in reply, pointed to the window-sill, where the snow lay heaped against the pane outside: which the eager boy, in looking out, had not noticed. She made them observe the light shining through it, and then opening the window gently, she detached a portion, and dropped it into Billy's ready hands.

She was rewarded by a cry, and the dash of the snow to the ground. 'Isabel!' cried her injured brother.

'Fetch a basin then!' said Isabel, laughing, 'carry some to the fire; and there see what it looks like.'

But carried thither, it offended Mary mightily, by turning into water even dirtier than its neighbour snow outside, under the strokes of James' broom.

'There's no use in it, if it comes so dirty,' said she; but Clara began to assure her of the incredible fact (to children), 'that snow keeps the flowers warm,' when the sound of a bell caught Isabel's ear; it was her mother's bell for her first breakfast, the signal that Isabel might go to her.

'Who will come and wish mamma a merry Christmas, children!' exclaimed she, 'are you all ready? can you say it?'

'Yes, yes, we all can, nurse has helped us,' they replied.

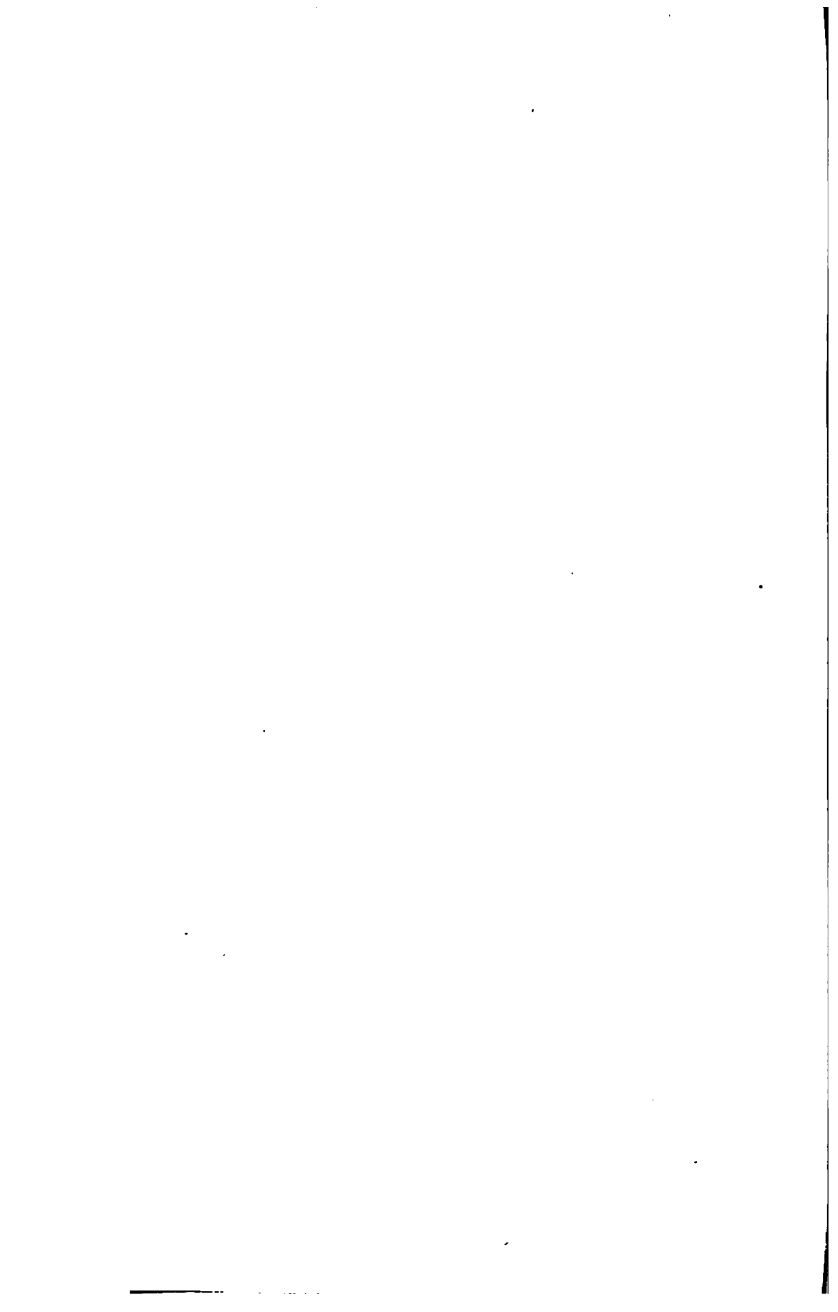
'Thank you, nurse,' said Isabel; 'that was very kind of you!'

'I had great pleasure, ma'am,' replied Mrs Thirswell, and though, she said no more, it was evident that she received Isabel's thanks with real gratification.

'That's a rare young lady,' she remarked to herself, as Isabel and the children trooped off. 'She'll be a blessing to them yet, I'll be bound! But she ought not have



ISABEL POINTING TO THE SNOW.



said she was ashamed of me ! However, may be I was hard on Miss Grace. I wonder whether she's up now ? I reckon not, nor won't be till after a mint of plaguing.'

A prophecy that proved unfortunately but too true. It took an amount of plaguing to rouse and dress Grace, that bid fair to sour her temper for the day ; and this really was not nurse Thirswell's fault. Grace was perverse and cross beyond all reason, and it was no wonder if her nurse's patience gave away—it was a bad beginning for Christmas day.

But, indeed, much of this ill-temper arose from hearing Isabel troop by with the other children, and from vexation at being left alone. The remembrance of her sister's kindness the night before, awoke with her—but only to find her gone, and monopolised by those with whom Grace had no sympathy. They had gone to sing their carol, too, she knew, for she had stoutly refused to learn it ! she had scarcely had an instant to brood over this grief before her nurse's unwelcome figure appeared in the doorway, summoning her, in the voice Grace hated, to rise and dress. This completed her trouble, against which she struggled and stormed, until the bell rang for prayers and breakfast, and she was scarcely out of bed.

By dressing with railway speed, she escaped rebuke for being late. But she looked too cross when she entered the room, to attract to herself any of the joyful greeting which every one else received on that happy morning.

Isabel had carried her little tribe into Mrs M'Ivor's room, there to sing their Christmas carol, which they sang very sweetly, led by her. That done, they came, one by one, to the gentle, delicate lady, for their kiss, and, then as gently left the room, bursting into a merry shout and dance, as they issued from the passage into the hall.

Isabel remained with Mrs M'Ivor.

'God bless you, my girl, my darling!' murmured her mother, as they were left alone. 'What a pretty thought it was, on this first home-Christmas, to bring them all here, with that old, old hymn! my child—my child! I pray God that you may be to them, the guide that I could not be, at least that I have not been——Isabel, I have been very ill—and I was spoilt! I hope nobody will spoil you!'

'Not very likely, dear mamma,' said the girl, leaning fondly over her still lovely mother, 'no one has much temptation to do that.'

'So much the better for you,—those poor children; and Grace? she was not there.'

'No, mamma, she was not awake. I thought she might be tired, so I did not like to disturb her.'

'Ah, poor child, she needs a firm hand. I fear she is incorrigibly naughty. And I have not the nerve to stand her temper, she tries me so. I do hope she will not anger her aunt. I am so afraid she may.'

'Not if I can help it mamma!'

'Thank you, my dear. I trust to you quite, and you are a new hand. Nurse tells me her temper is as violent as ever.'

'Perhaps nurse does not understand her.'

'Perhaps not. But I should think she did. She can manage the others very well. But Grace is incorrigible, she tells me—hopeless, I am afraid. However, my dear, you may succeed. We have,—that is her father and nurse have,—tried punishing and scolding, but it all seems useless, and I am sure she is beyond me! I leave her to you.'

And Mrs M'Ivor applied herself to her breakfast. The transient gleam of self-reproach had passed away, and she

appeared again to forget that she could, illness and nerves notwithstanding, be responsible for the melancholy shortcomings of poor little Grace.

Isabel remained reading to her mother until the bell summoned her to breakfast. The merry breakfast, at which young and old seemed equally full of joy and fun. All but Grace ! who sat in her corner mum and glum, unreached by all the happiness around her,—in the party, but in no sense of it. She was wondering whether Isabel's thoughts could be of her, whether the kiss last night, the richest token of love she had almost ever received, could mean all it seemed to say to her ; Isabel was there, but apparently taking no heed of her ; and so Grace turned from her, and told herself that it was all very well for them to laugh, whom every body cared for ! but for herself she did well to be sulky and silent.

She did Isabel injustice, whose thoughts had been full of her sister. But a glance at Grace's countenance had betrayed so plainly the miserable state of her temper, that Isabel had not deemed it wise, by any notice, to draw the attention of others to her.

But as soon as breakfast was over, as they were leaving the room, she joined Grace, and twining her arm in hers, asked if she would go with her to their mother's room ?

'No !' said Grace rudely, wrenching herself free. 'I won't go there at all.'

Isabel of necessity withdrew her arm. How could she guess that any desire for kindness from her was at the bottom of all this surliness ? Hurt and sorry, she passed on alone.

'There !' said Grace to herself, 'I have done it, and so much the better. She doesn't care for me ; nobody does. I **shall** only be in the way.'

Perhaps a little whisper in her heart said : Whose fault is it ? How can she ? But it was not strong enough to influence her conduct, only perhaps to make her more irritable.

She was still pausing in the hall, when all the rest of the children came rushing by. Some rare fun was evidently in prospect, for all were chattering eagerly.

‘When did uncle say ? after dinner ? after which dinner ? ours, or the big one ?’

‘Oh ! after the big one ! there’s afternoon church after ours.’

‘And what was it to be ? Snap Dragon ;—what’s that ? and a Christmas Tree for the school children, which we may see ! and music,—the band, aunt said.’

‘And where ?—and where ?—’

‘Out in the kitchen. Oh ! ’tis such fun ! I do so like Christmas ! What are we going to see now ?’

‘The kitchen ! It is all covered with holly. Tom said we ought to go and see it. Come quickly. Oh ! do make haste, or we shall have to go and dress for church.’

All rushed on, when the youngest Walpole slipped on the matting laid over the oaken floor, and fell heavily. This child was a great favourite of Grace’s. He was a pretty little boy, with light curly hair and light blue eyes. She had taken to him from the first moment of her arrival at the Hall. Strange to say, he had also taken to her, which few children ever did. Now, on seeing his mishap, Grace hurried to his assistance, and raising him, she soothed his sorrows and wiped his tears, with almost as much tenderness as her sister Isabel could have shown.

But though baby boy received her attentions most graciously while his grief lasted, his thought, when it had a little passed, was to follow the rest to see the kitchen.

And, oh ! woe of woes ! the door was shut, and how was he to go ?

‘ Gracey ! open the door,—do open the door,’ he cried, scrambling out of her arms, and shaking at ‘that bad door’ with all his might.

‘ Philly, love ! dear, dear Philly, stay with me. Do stay with me, Philly, and leave the kitchen. Come and love me one little bit, Philly, do,’ implored his cousin.

But not a bit ! ‘ No, cross-patch Gracey ;—let me out,’ roared Philly.

‘ Do you call me cross, Philly ?’ asked Grace, reproachfully ; and never a bit moving to open the door, against which Philly was beating himself in vain. ‘ Open the door ! open the door !’

And it was opened by some one inside, who let the eager child through, and closed it again. Grace was left to herself, and in pure distress she leant against a chair near, and burst into tears.

‘ Holloo !’ cried a voice close by. ‘ I thought all that thunder-cloud would come to rain some time or other ! What’s the matter, Grace ?’ inquired the owner of the voice,—none other than Roger, the very last person she cared should be witness of her grief, except perhaps nurse Thirswell, or her father.

‘ Why, what’s the matter ?’ continued he, intending no unkindness. ‘ I saw you were glum enough all breakfast time. Are you ill ?’

‘ Nothing,’ growled she.

‘ Nothing ? Well then, don’t cry ; or at any rate, don’t cry here, for I think uncle and aunt and papa are coming directly.’

Then Grace gathered herself up and hurried upstairs, without bestowing another look upon her brother. She

retreated rapidly to her room. Whether she intended again to bury herself in the press, or whether too thoroughly frightened once out of that ever to enter it again, she reached her room, without any definite intention, we cannot tell. But she entered, and closed the door, before she was arrested by the sight of Isabel, seated by the dressing-table.

Her coming seemed to disturb her sister, who rose rather hastily and walked to the window, where she apparently became occupied by her pocket handkerchief and the view outside, for she remained standing there in silence, whilst Grace stood still at the door watching her. The remembrance of her kindness again returned to Grace; and what would she not have given to spring to her sister, and sob out her bitter loneliness upon her shoulder? But this she could not have done, so she felt, to save her life. And soon the opportunity was lost. Isabel, surprised at the unusual silence, turned round and perceived her.

‘Grace!—I thought you were Sarah come about the room. Isn’t it time to dress for church? May I help you? Can I help you? My own things are ready, I know.’

Grace’s temper prompted her to say NO, and that so grumphily, that Isabel turned away. She could not, no, she would not, force kindness on a person so determined to reject it.

No more words passed between the sisters. Both busied themselves in preparations for church, and both were in due time summoned downstairs. The party going to church had gathered in the hall. The children looked full of excitement. The visit to the kitchen, and the perambulation round the house to see all the ‘Christmasing,

were charming. And now they were going to see the church, about which many of the party had been busy for more than a week, but which it so happened none had yet seen completed.

The young ones gathered round Isabel. Mary clamoured for one hand, Neddy for the other. Billy danced along before her, whilst Roger carried her Prayer-book, and Tom her umbrella, that her hands might be free for the little ones. Grace caught the smile of pleasure with which her uncle and aunt observed their hearty welcome. How she grudged them the power of expressing it—how gladly would she have joined, if they had been alone, or if, — What!

But now she would not even join the party round Isabel. Carefully did she keep aloof, following just near enough to escape being called up, yet far enough away to be, as it seemed her fate to be, alone.

Nor as she returned from church was the case far otherwise. Isabel could not have walked with her alone, as the children would certainly have followed, and with them Grace did not care to have her sister's company. Nor, considering how ungraciously she had hitherto received all Isabel's advances, was it surprising if the latter felt unable to attempt anything further.

Luncheon passed, which was the children's dinner, and the time for afternoon church drew near. Isabel had offered her services to keep the children, whilst Mrs Thirswell went to church; and Roger and Tom, on hearing that they might choose, whether to stay and help her, or go with their uncle and aunt to church, decided to remain. Grace, given the same choice, also chose to remain. Walking with her 'old nurse,' or with uncle and aunt Walpole, being to her about equally distasteful. The consequence

of all this was, that Isabel was installed in the arm-chair, in the comfortable library, to tell or read a story, as soon as her auditors could decide which, with the promise of singing as soon as she had finished. Grace, attracted by this latter hope, ensconced herself in a distant sofa-couch, whence she could see and hear, almost without being herself seen.

From this sheltered nook, closely curled up, because of the cold, which poor little Indian Gracey felt keenly, she listened intently to Isabel's reading. The first story was *Inconstant and Trustful*. Then followed the two pretty stories out of 'Earth's many Voices ;' *Little Comforters*, and *Little Sacrifices*. The latter interested the children extremely. They pitied the kind little brook, that was for ever being called away from its own earnest wish, by something wanting its help. Now the pining flowers, now the thirsty grass, until it never reached the mill, it was so longing to see go round.

'Sister Isabel ! you'd be just like that,' exclaimed little Mary, sitting on her sister's lap. 'You would be the brook helping every body.'

'No, Mary ! no dear ! you must not say that,' exclaimed Isabel, whose heart, poor girl, had been reproaching her all through the tale, that she had done so little, so very little for Grace on that day. Surely no thirsty flower, no pining grass, needed help as she did ; and what had Isabel done ? Not tried half enough, perhaps even let pride come in her way and drive off her sisterly pity. Little Mary's praise struck upon her conscience as altogether undeserved. Nor did she stay to consider how she had been repulsed by Grace, so decidedly and rudely !

She closed her book, unwilling to read more, and walked to the piano.

Grace's judgment on the matter would probably have corroborated little Mary's, but she could not stay to think about it. When Isabel repaired to the piano, she banished all other considerations, and prepared for complete enjoyment.

And for a short time she possessed and revelled in it ; but ere long the children, as children will, began to talk and play, first softly, then louder and louder, until all pleasure in the music was destroyed. Isabel paid no heed to them. But Roger, whose taste for music was almost equal to his sister Grace's, chid them, though in vain, and at length Grace, jarred past all endurance, bestowed a hearty slap on one unfortunate child, who unluckily came within her reach.

Of course the victim roared ; and all the children took part against Grace, crying out how cross she always was. She was about to defend herself very angrily, when, to her great surprise, she found Roger taking her part, and Isabel quietly ordering all the little players and criers up into the nursery, telling them that they could play there without disturbing Grace, who liked to listen to the music. They departed at length ; and Grace, for once in her life, was left with a portion of her own family, in union with them, not blamed, nor considered cross, nor pushed aside, but the contrary. It was some little time before she could sufficiently recover from her surprise to give herself up to enjoyment, but at length the music absorbed her attention, and she sat, and listened, and listened, until soothed and comparatively happy, she fell sound asleep in the warm seat into which she had curled herself. How long she slept she did not know. But she was roused by an impression so strong that it quite awoke her, that Isabel had been close by her, and had given her another kiss, like the prized token of the night before.

She started up, and looked about her. Isabel was in truth not far off, in the act of leaving the room, for the half-past five bell was ringing, which always summoned her to her mother's room. But a warm *couvre-de-pied* lay over Grace herself, which assuredly she had not placed there. So, whether the fancy were true or not, Grace could not tell (Isabel did not look back as she walked away), yet Grace thought it must be, and she derived from it more hope and comfort than ever.

The remainder of the evening passed off without any further event worthy of record. Except, indeed, that the Snap Dragon was delightful, the Christmas Tree more than wonderfully beautiful, and the Punch beautiful, if it had not been quite so hot and strong. Billy, who gulped a good mouthful, was nearly choked; and Mary, profiting by his example, almost refused to take any at all.

What more can we say? Everything was 'as nice as ever it could possibly be;' and Billy thought it was an immense pity that Christmas did not come once a month, at least, if not a great deal oftener!





CHAPTER VII.

THE COTTAGE OF THE DESOLATE.

' There are to whom this gay green earth
Might seem a dreary desert cave ;
For they have marr'd their holy birth
And rent the bowers that o'er them wave.'

Keble.



WE must now shift the scene of our story from Walpole Hall, with its handsome rooms, to a lonely cottage in a distant wood.

This cottage need not have been an uncomfortable abode ; it was prettily situated, and was kept clean inside and out. But it lacked all look of home.

A small patch for cabbages had been cleared near it ; but no flowers, only weeds, grew there at any season. No creepers were trained over the bare walls, neither plants or blinds ever shaded the windows.

In all the arrangements inside there was the same attention to bare tidiness, the same rejection of comfort and of loveliness. The tall chimney-piece was bare ; no bright ornaments adorned any part of the dwelling ; no cupboard was to be seen, full of pretty china, but only an open shelf, holding a bare sufficiency for daily use.

One deal table, one deal chair, one settle, and one ticking tiny Dutch clock, with its disproportionately long pendants, completed the furniture of the outer room, unless we include the shelf in the corner.

The inner contained a curtainless bed, covered by a faded patchwork quilt, a small washing-stand and a chest, something like a sailor's, only not so large, which stood by the bedside, apparently ready packed for a start. In fact, the whole habitation had the appearance of belonging to one whose heart was far away, who remained here while she must, but whose home it was not.

This was mother O'Neill's house.

Nor was she far off. In the wood, at some little distance, she was gathering sticks for her fire, and by her side stood no less a person than Mr Hotspur Montgomery.

He was apparently imploring the woman to do some thing for him.

'Now, really, Mrs O'Neill, it is not so very much that I want you to do. It is very hard that a fellow like me should not be allowed to ride. I only ask you to spend my own money about it. Can't you get the pony for the six pounds?'

'Well. Yes. No. I cannot tell,' responded she. 'But what will Sir William and my Lady say when they know of it? They will hunt me worse than ever. And that Colonel is enough for one while.'

'But they will never know it. I tell you they will never know it. I shall keep the pony far enough away, I can tell you. I would not let them know, for my own sake. There is no danger. The pony shall stay at Jack Rivers, just over the hill, and I shall get it when I want it.'

'Aye—and the first time Jack wants a favour of the

Squire, up he'll go. I know, I know—no, no! it isn't such as I can get you that pony.

'It isn't such as you that are afraid, I should think;' retorted Hotspur.

'Eh!' screamed the woman, glaring at him with uplifted eyes, which hitherto she had scarcely raised from the sticks she was gathering. 'Am not I to be afraid? I that am hunted, hated, shunned by every body? Who'd come to me then if I was sick? Who'd care if I were dead? They'd be glad rather. I'm like a lone bird, driven away by them all! But I am not afraid—no? but I would I could go to my own—I would I could go—I do!' She wailed; recovering herself, however, instantly, she added, 'but I can't get you this pony, master, I can't buy a good pony for that money, you know.'

'I don't know,' replied the boy. 'Jack told me he was sure this one was sold for under five pounds. He knows that Colonel Walpole sold it under that ——.'

'May be 'twas a donkey, like himself, that Jack knows about!' suggested mother O'Neill.

'No, no!' returned Hotspur, indignantly, 'he said this pony. Now, mother, do get it me. I can't pay you any more. I have none, really. I have not got a bit more money—nor can I get any. I'll ask Jack, if you won't; but I'd rather you did ——.'

'Then ask Jack,' was the careless reply. 'I have no call to do it—I shall not do it—you can ask Jack.'

But this arrangement did not suit Hotspur at all. He had the best of reasons for employing her instead of Jack, or his old chum Bob Dacres, namely, being sure that neither of the men would oblige him; but to her he poured out a string of minor reasons; that she was further off, less likely to be questioned by 'his people,'

etc., etc., and he continued urging her by every argument he could think of.

But it is very doubtful whether all the rest of the afternoon would have been long enough wherein to persuade, had not Hotspur unconsciously touched the spring that opened her will to his at once.

'I am determined then to have that pony,' he exclaimed, at length. 'I don't care half so much to have any other. But it was to be Roger's, and he wished to have it—and was vexed enough when it was sold away from him; he'll be vexed now if he sees me riding it. And he goes cantering past me, as much as to say—See how well I can ride. I hate the fellow, that I do; and I will have the pony, if it is only to spite him.'

'Why should two of you hate that boy? He seems quiet enough.' And the mother paused in her stick picking.

'I hate him, because he is so stuck up and so cocky. I tell you, his very riding past one is enough to make me hate him. And not two days ago he called me a rascal, and flew upon me and shook me like a big dog. I tell you I do hate him—and if that is not reason enough, I don't know what is.'

'Do you know his sister, the little dark one?'

'What, Grace? Yes, she's nobody. What do you ask that for?'

'I was thinking—about the pony.'

'What?—the pony! What has that to do with Grace?'

'Nothing particular; except that she might do it, perhaps.'

'What! buy the pony? Nonsense, mother O'Neill'

'I wasn't thinking about buying the pony, but getting

more money for it. However, it matters not,' added mother O'Neill, collecting her sticks in her apron, and moving towards the cottage.

'It does matter immensely,' exclaimed the boy, following her; 'Tell me what you mean.'

'Not if I don't choose,' retorted she, turning upon him the glance that most people quailed before.

But he was too eager. He followed her into the cottage, and stood by the entrance, impatiently tapping his foot on the floor, and watching all her proceedings over the fire. These she protracted; now breaking some sticks after a long choice between them, then slowly laying them in the grate with the straw, then when she had lit them, deliberately watching the tongues of flame as they shot through here and there, feeding them with a fresh stick in one place after another, thoughtfully—heedfully—slowly—as if her whole soul were absorbed in her fire, and nothing else in the world could engage her attention.

But, perhaps, the fire was the very last thing she was really thinking about. She was waiting for her hints to take their effect, and was watching keenly, though so secretly, the workings of Hotspur's will. Her busy mind, intent for so long upon one object, always just within her reach, and just eluding it, had at last, she tremblingly hoped, hit upon a successful plan. If the tower had no guardian, but Roger asleep, if the door could be opened by a hand from within, if Roger could even then be occupied by a third party, what might she not do towards getting into the vault, and so obtaining the treasure which she knew had been left there? that dearly longed-for treasure, which would carry her far away from this hated abode, and secure her welcome with her husband and boys abroad. That once obtained, how easy to work on the children's fears,

to insist on secrecy, at least until she could escape ;—then, if they got punished, it would be no more than they deserved. And why should she care? But would the plan bear? It must, if at all, within the next few days. So intense was the mother's longing, that the very shortness of the time seemed almost to take away her breath. In the meantime poor Hotspur's impatience become almost unsupportable, and a glance of mother O'Neill towards him, which he caught, give him an excuse to advance towards the fire, and re-open the subject.

'How can I get more money?' whispered he, as he seated himself on the low settle by the fireside.

'Are you game to get it?' inquired the woman, after a long searching glance into his face; adding, in the same cautious tone, 'Dare you punish Roger for your shaking?'

A fierce glance of delight in Hotspur's eye convinced her that she had won the day. And with an exultation scarcely concealed, she began to unfold her plans. Her tone was low and cautious; the more confidential Hotspur thought, and the plan suited well with his cunning bullying character. Grace was to be worked upon to hang the key within reach; more than this mother O'Neill dared not trust her to do, nor was more required. Then the entrance thus opened, the woman and Hotspur were to creep in late on Thursday night, the night that is of the children's party. Mrs O'Neill was to watch the door. Hotspur, in some disguise, was to repair to Roger's chamber, and with Pincher's help, to repay him for his own chastisement.

So far the plan was detailed—much to Hotspur's satisfaction—but there it stopped—.

'But the money, mother! where is that to come from?' inquired the boy.

Mother O'Neill paused. She was doubting whether

to tell him more :—‘Never you mind,’ she said at length, ‘if I have the key of the door, I needn’t bide there and watch. Need I?’ she added, sharply, for her keen eye detected hesitation in Hotspur’s manner.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘are you going to steal? I cannot help in that!’

‘No, boy! who said I was? no, indeed—steal! ’twould be but my own I took, if I did; but I am not going to steal, sure enough.’

Both were silent for a few moments; and then she said, ‘If you will be true to all this, I’ll secure you the pony, he’s a real beauty too.’

‘So he is,’ said Hotspur, his short hesitation quite conquered by this remembrance. ‘I will be true—indeed, you may depend upon me—indeed you may.’

‘And mum’s the word, then? sure and safe?’

‘Aye, I should think so,’ laughed Hotspur, as he rose to go, ‘when shall I hear again?’

‘Monday night—here—if not, Tuesday night,’ said mother O’Neill, and they parted. Hotspur pursued his way alone by the path that led across the stream, up the ravine, and over fields to a road near his own home. He was musing, as he walked, of what? probably of a confused jumble of thoughts; he should have the pony, so far his wish would be gratified; he should frighten Roger, and pay him back his insult with interest, another great wish gratified; but that woman, what could she be going to do! not steal, she had assured him of that;—what then? ‘If she’d got the key, she needn’t wait at the door, need she?’ then they might be surprised, then she might escape and leave him there, pleasant that, though! He had felt Colonel Walpole’s hand once, encountered his scorn once, was it worth while trying it again? and Roger, too; his force of

rage had startled Hotspur, so startled him, that he would have welcomed Colonel Walpole's interference, if Colonel Walpole had not been worse than his nephew. Hotspur had been driven breathless by one, but utterly shamed by the other. Altogether he did not feel at ease. And even the thought of the pony barely sufficed at times to blot out the recollection that he had engaged to assist in an act of danger under the untrustworthy guidance of mother O'Neill. So Hotspur determined to stay away from church on the next day, and go, if he could, without being discovered, to inspect the tower he was to enter in such an ugly manner, and upon such an ugly errand. Supposing, after inspection he did not approve, Hotspur would fail the mother, and leave her to be schemer, watcher, and thief, by herself. Hotspur 'reckoned without his host.'

Mother O'Neill had sat still at her fire listening to his departing footsteps. As they died on her ear, she started up, and hurried to the window, where, concealed herself, she could watch him, as he scrambled up the opposite steep pathway. The expression of her face was strange, it was almost regretful.

'It was a wicked deed—; they are too young to be entangled in it, almost too young, and one a girl—pshaw, you old fool!' she exclaimed aloud, 'and aint they the children of your worst enemies; and was my Jem much older when he was dragged before the magistrates; and then shut up in that jail—and me, his lone mother, couldn't get to him! *no* said they, *he's safe there, and he shall be punished as he deserves.* And am I to have pity on their children? Never! never!'

And mother O'Neill shook her fist at the figure of the boy, as it disappeared over the crown of the hill, with an expression which, assuredly, had he seen it, would have

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clenched his rising determination to leave her in the lurch.

Mother O'Neill busied herself about her house. It seemed impossible for her to sit still. So soon it must be done, if done at all. This was Saturday. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday was the night of the party at Walpole Hall; Wednesday that of the servants, the evening before. On either there would be great confusion in the house. On both Roger would sleep in the tower. Only five days more, and her darling hope must be realised or fail. Within a week she might be away safe with her treasure; or, obliged to flee, without chance of return; or in prison. It was no wonder if the heart of the woman quailed before the presence of these thoughts, or that the next instant she banished her fears, and turned with all her energy to secure success.

First she knew every inch of the ground round the Hall, and the tower; which shrub would hide her, which corner was safe, which path was unfrequented. No need for her to visit the spot again; she was quite able to conceal many more people than herself and the boy, if necessity required it.

But Grace! how was she to secure her? And Hotspur, was he safe?—no! of that she felt sure, except so far as his interest chained him. His character was well known to his father's dependants, and mother O'Neill had gathered hints enough to be aware that she could place no dependence on his promise, or his honour, or his courage.

Therefore, glad enough to be occupied, she determined to start for the distant farm, where the pony lived, that she might obtain possession of it, and so fetter Hotspur to her will.

It was a long walk from her cottage to this moorland farm, which bordered on the extensive moors themselves. For many miles did these latter stretch away over the highlands of that part of the country. They afforded pasturage for hundreds of cattle and sheep, besides supporting a breed of ponies and small wiry horses, peculiar to themselves. For aught she knew, the pony of which she was in quest, might be scampering about with a herd of brother ponies miles out of her reach ; but she could probably learn something of him, and this would serve her purpose almost as well as possessing him.

So she stalked on and on, excited by her too eager desire to heed the distance, or the shortness of the days. She must tell her tale to no one ; she must get or hear of the pony ; she must secure Hotspur, and frighten Grace ; she must be quick, and safe, and sure ; she must, oh ! she must succeed ! and with her long staff in her hand, and her red cloak wrapped around her, she stepped rapidly on. When turning a sharp corner in a lane, she encountered Bob Dacres, just the last person in the world she wanted to meet.

How shall we describe Bob Dacres ! He was one of those happy individuals, who could be useful to everybody at some time or other ; who was popular everywhere, if respected by few. Though Bob was reputed honest, when he was not too severely tempted to be otherwise. He tinkered a little ; he tailored, patched, and cobbled,—rarely for himself ; he caught rats ; he rabbitied perhaps still more ; he was never *caught* poaching, but if inquiries were made for snares and gins, or young gentlemen wanted instruction in that line, no one so knowing as Bob to teach or to tell. He had been Hotspur's right hand in his many surreptitious enjoyments, until one day, when the boy had

determined on a dangerous scheme, and Bob, fearing the consequences, threatened to tell of him, and so prevented it. Hotspur was too much involved in secret plans, quite to break with Bob, but this event considerably cooled his confidence, and caused him to transfer his plans and jobs to the mother, when she would undertake them, a transference Bob somewhat resented.

Bob came whistling along the lane ; he was always gleeful, was Bob. He was surrounded by a troop of small dogs, running hither and thither, up and down the hedges, all eager after some scent or fancy. Several of them stopped short at the sight of mother O'Neill, with pricked ears and tails erect, and one or two of the most inexperienced burst into barking.

'Whisht ! ye born vools !' ejaculated Bob. 'Wot be a barking at, wid yer zilly tongues now, at th' auld mother vor, eh ? An ye hadnt a'be zich babbies, yer wouldnt a been zich daft loobies ! I be main zorry,' he added, addressing her. 'Get out o' the way ! will 'ee ?' he exclaimed, as a smitten pup ran between his legs, 'bad luck to the whole pack of 'ee ! I be cruel zorry, Missus, that my dogs be zo illmannered ; but they'd show more rivrence vor a bunny or a rat anyday, than vor the best born leddy in England, I'll warnes. Get away wid 'ee ! Get alang wid 'ee !' he repeated, as he struck right and left among his pack ; not so much perhaps to scatter them, as to gain time for discovering the woman's object in going to Tenderden farm, as he felt, no doubt, she was ; for they were on the road that led nowhere but to it, and then on to the moors.

She stood before him, startled and angry. This unexpected meeting was very likely to frustrate her present purpose, nor could she at that moment think of any reason to give for her presence there. One of the youngest dogs just then

snapped at her cloak, and shook it violently ; upon which she turned upon him with a vehemence quite beyond his offence, and struck him so severely with her staff, as to send him, yelping and yelling, behind his master's legs for refuge. The action seemed to relieve her, but it did not restore her presence of mind, for she committed the blunder of venting her wrath upon Bob—first on account of his dogs—and then because of his prying ways ! But suddenly remembering that the meeting had been purely accidental, and that she was betraying how much it annoyed her—she stood like a stag at bay.

Bob's merry eyes twinkled, as he replied : ' Why now mother ! I'd no thoughts o' meeting you yere, zo var afiel, and zo late tew—and as vor prying and watching ! why ! 'taint in the nature of Bob Dacres to hunt into anybody's little zacrets ' (here he a little slandered himself, for his curiosity was unbounded), ' nor to harm 'em, by telling on 'em, if by the merest haccident, like this yer meeting a'tween you and me may be ! he find 'un out.'

' I have no secrets, that you should find 'em out ! ' glared mother O'Neill.

' Aw *no*, a' corse not,' consented her tormentor. ' Only ye zeem zo mift out of rayzon—but I zim you'm a gawing tew Tenderden farm now ? now I was a gawing there myself, jist to see arter a pony, and a couple of pups up there ; only 't was agetting cruel late vor zich a tramp. But as you be a gawing, why, I'll jist bear ye company, and be sociable for old acquaintance sake—whew—whew—whew ! ' whistled he, gathering his dogs round him. There were nearly a dozen of them, of all colours and characters, from the sagacious rat-catcher, the hero of a hundred fights ; to the raw impudent puppy, that had committed the onslaught on the red cloak. There was the

wiry, knowing, comparatively well-bred, black and tan; the dirty, misshapen, ugly white turnspit—all sorts and degrees of small dogs, and all now came pouring over the hedges, or trotting up and down the lane to Bob, in answer to his call.

He stood gazing admiringly at his darlings, forgetting for the moment mother O'Neill and all her secrets. He was a figure worth beholding. Hob-nail shoes, bright blue stockings, shorts tied at the knee with tape, and patched with many colours (now, patches and all, in rags). A very old velveteen coat, mended here and there with cloth, a faded purple waistcoat with one or two gilt buttons, a red worsted comforter, and a hat bent into every possible shape in which a hat could still cover a human head, composed his apparel. His unwilling companion might well have objected to the appearance of her uninvited comrade, but to object to Bob's rags never entered the heads of any of his neighbours. Rags must have been his normal condition. Such as could remember his boyhood, never could recall him in any other covering; and since he grew up and married Mrs Bob, his case became more hopeless than ever. She was a rag-collector and rag-merchant, and might well be supposed to have a liking for rags in preference to whole garments. Indeed, many of the wives from whom she gathered her stock-in-trade, would often put away a garment not quite so tattered as to be called 'a regular rag,' because poor Bob and Kitty were so tattered, really the good village souls were 'most ashamed to see them,' which was more than either Bob or Kitty were to see themselves.

Such was the aggravating companion that had fastened himself upon the unfortunate mother, as if to worry her already overtaxed nerves, and shorten her short time, by

defeating her present effort. It was in vain to hope entirely to baffle his penetration, because he knew just enough of her past history to have a possible clue to her objects of desire. Mother O'Neill felt worn out with vexation, but she tried to rally her presence of mind, that she might 'double on him' yet.

There was one more member of this strange companionship, who had his own plans and ideas, and this was the puppy. He had taken a violent dislike to the red cloak and its wearer ; and he omitted no opportunity of snapping at the one or biting the heels of the other, all the way up the lane. By this insane proceeding he more than once interrupted his master, and assisted the mother to escape unpleasant remarks, in a manner that he would certainly have avoided could his puppy brains have admitted the fact.





CHAPTER VIII.

WEARY AND WORN.

'Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man ;
'That taketh man for his defence ;
'And in his heart goeth from the Lord.'
'And all the people shall say, AMEN,'
* * * *

(Which here means, In Truth,—so it is !)



HEY had walked on for some distance, side by side up the lane, mother O'Neill and Bob. She had recovered her self-possession so far as to be on the watch against his attempts to discover what was taking her to Tenterden. So far, then, she had baffled him, and Bob appeared to acquiesce. But she could not decide on any plan to rid herself of him. However, they were still a good mile off the farm, and therefore time remained for consideration.

Bob now began to amuse himself, if not her, by descanting on the merits of his dogs : 'Rale beauties they were ; even the young un, Tear 'em, would equal the best ov em. 'Twas but last week he cotched zich a rat over taw Zincot Abbey, right over they moors ;—neither Jack nor Snap could a bate en ! es had a rare hunt down there ; the barns, the tallets, the linhays villed to overvlowing wid zich rampageous rats ; but the corn hadnt a been taken in

last week. It would be next ! and he was gowin again by Wednesday or Thursday to have a reg'lar try everywhere after them. He reckoned they'd be killed by hundreds.'

'Wednesday or Thursday,' remarked his companion ; 'they're the grand doings at the Hall.'

"Taint naught to the likes of me, mother O'Neill ; why Kitty and me aint got a whole garment 'atween us, to go to zich grandeur in ! You don't mane to be near the Hall on them nights, do'ee !' he inquired casually. 'Niver,— !' he exclaimed, as her involuntary hesitation surprised him. 'I niver,' continued the amazed Bob. 'Why zure ! you and they beant friends, be ? I thought Jem's shadow stood 'atween you, and would allays.'

Mother O'Neill's hand clenched under her cloak. 'Aye,—always,' she said, hoarsely. 'I never said we were friends ; I never said I was going there ! But it matters not ;'—and she strode quickly on.

'Cur'ous,' thought Bob to himself. Bob had known Jem O'Neill ; they had been boys together, and perhaps this fact made him regard the mother, with less fear and more pity, than was common among her neighbours. Perhaps it also inclined her to feel more peaceably towards him.

Nevertheless Bob's respect for Colonel Walpole and his family was sincere ; and he began to consider whether the presence of this woman at their feasts, as her manner seemed to threaten, boded them good. He would not have betrayed her for the world, but he began to think whether he could not rake up some garment that would fit him to be present likewise, and guard them, and her also, from harm.

He was deep in thought, when a rush among the dogs

after some game, made him spring to the summit of the hedge. They were tearing away across a field at the top of their speed, much too eager to attend to his whistling and commands, that they would 'Come here,' and 'lie down.'

With an angry exclamation Bob jumped down into the field and disappeared after them. Mother O'Neill pursued her way alone. She was nearing the enclosures of Tenderden farm, and she looked anxiously round for any signs of the pony. But none could she see. She hastily decided, therefore, to go boldly in and inquire after it, whether Bob were near or not. She would pretend to want one to start a carrying trade. And she as hastily concocted a story of success abroad and money transmitted home for her comfort. She would even consult Bob himself on the subject, if he returned too soon. This decision seemed to restore her to herself. She might make use of him perhaps. At any rate, he would be away on the two days on which her grand attempt was to be made. But how could she let out that she might be near the Hall on those nights? How dangerous it might have been. But as he would be safe twenty miles off nearly, it did not matter.

She passed by the yard-fence as she arranged all this, and paused at the gate. Bob was nowhere within sight or hearing; but the farming man was standing near the table, engaged in rubbing down the horses, just returned from work. To him mother O'Neill at once spoke, enquiring if the Master was within, as she wanted to ask him a question. The man looked her well over for a moment, and then returned to his task, remarking, that the Master was not in, and would not be in for an hour or two.

'I can't wait so long; is the foreman at home? I must speak to some one.'

The foreman was with the Master, and would be back when the Master came, and no sooner. Could not she leave a message ?

‘No,’ said mother O’Neill, ‘time was very precious,’ and she had come a long way ; she could not come again.’

‘Well, but the message. Why not leave that ?’

‘No ; I’ve come to ask about a pony, and I must see one before I go.’

‘Aw ! well now, what a chatter about nothing. Why, he could tell about the ponies just as well as the foreman, or the Master either. They were all out on the moors ; a rare lot of them ; but none of them to be fetched in for nothing. It was such a mortal chase to catch any of them. There was not one in, except that vicious brute that Squire Walpole, at the Hall, had sold to the Master, and bad luck go with it, for its ill-temper. All the rest were gone, and would not be back till the spring.’

Mother O’Neill knew that this was the very pony. But there was silence for a few seconds, during which the man continued vigorously rubbing his horse. Then he looked up to inquire what she wanted of a pony ? To which she replied that she was thinking of setting up a pony and cart. Why was this pony left behind. Perhaps it might do for her purpose ?

‘Aw ! well. I’m sure I wish the Master’d let you buy it then ; and yet it would be a shame to let a woman like you drive such a nasty beast. ’Tis just about the most vicious, ill-tempered thing that I ever had to do with. ’Twas sold from the Hall because the man couldn’t manage it ; in the stables or out, it was equally cross and bad. No, no, you wait till the open weather comes, and then you come again, and we’ll find you a nice, steady-

going pony,—just what you want. As for this other, you'd best not think of it.'

'But what would the Master take for it, do ye think?' persisted the mother.

'Take for it! nothing, I should think! at least, not from you. Do ye know the pony? what makes ye so bent upon it? Go and ask they to Walpole Hall, and they'll tell you about it. Why here's Bob Dacres hisself, coming across the yard, he was after the pony late last fall for that young gentleman, Sir William Montgomery's son; but he soon saw enough to make him change his mind. I say, Bob! come along here, and tell this old lady what ye think of Colonel Walpole's black pony; Demon, we call it!'

Mother O'Neill dared not say—'hush!'

'Wot! that 'ere pony as you brought vro the Hall?—Why, mother,' observed Bob, planting himself before her, and lifting his hat to air his head, 'why mother, be you a wanting that 'ere pony? Wol now, I'll back 'en agin any in the 'varsal world for kickin', jibbin', bitin', startin', and any thing else that a pony ought not to dew. Wot be wanting a er vor? why! I wouldn't let es ave 'en. I'd pison 'en first! Wot be wanting of a pony at all vor then?' added he inquiringly, 'and wot a pity es didn't tell about it coming up along, and I could ave saved ye all this long walk now!'

'You bought that pony for a song, didn't you? asked mother O'Neill of the farming man: 'I have not much money, and the cart must take some, you know,' she added aside to Bob.

'Aye! and dear at that! The sooner he's made dog's meat of the better, in my opinion. You were after him for young Master Montgomery, weren't you?' he asked of Bob.

'Is! I wor, and a power of trouble I had to stop the

young gintleman vro gitting en. I had to zay out tew last, that I'd tell on en, if er was to buy en. I hain't a got much of a conscience to be zure, tis but a handy little un, you know ! but I couldn't zleep in my bed, and let he, that's zo much zet by, and knaws no more o' 'osses than a blind pup, break er neck to a zartainty on that ere broot, (Demon, d'ye call en ?) I'm no ways zure, Master Hotspur has geed un up ; er was cruel mazed about en, zure enough !

Mother O'Neill had turned away. But a glance that Bob at this moment accidentally cast upon her, caused suspicion to dart through his mind as to the cause of her inquiries after this pony. He had not dreamt of her purpose before, and the suspicion was very vague now. Probably, as she was unaware of his glance, her countenance expressed more of the chagrin she felt than would have been the case had she been on her guard.

Her way did indeed seem sadly blocked. But as nothing could be done about the pony, with Bob and the man both against her, and the Master from home, she was obliged to content herself with telling the latter that she would return one day, when the weather should be more open, and a pony more useful.

It was a careless speech, and a wondrous confirmation of Bob's suspicions. The idea of coming four miles to and fro, eight in all, after a pony, just after a heavy fall of snow, when he could be of no use, and must be fed. She did not want it for herself, of that Bob felt quite sure ; and Bob had no mind to let her do the job for Hotspur, by baulking which he had lost that young gentleman's confidence, and numerous shillings. So whilst going home in company with her, to the great aggravation of both her and Tearem, he tried every means he could think of to worm

her secret out of her, in vain. She was on her guard against all direct attacks, for she guessed his suspicions. Conversation flagged between them at last. They were approaching the turning to her cottage, where their roads separated; and the poor mother was getting thoroughly tired out.

Bob felt it, and truly pitied her. 'I be main glad, mother,' he began, kindly endeavouring to speak on a pleasant subject, and forgetting his suspicions for an instant. 'I be main glad to hear that Jem and they others be gitting on zo wull in they forrin parts!'

'Who told you so?' asked she wearily.

'Why! they've a zint'ee home money, hain't they?' exclaimed he, and in his surprise he listened intently for her answer, and felt its perfect truth, when she said: 'Ah, no! I'd a gone to them if they had!'

'But how then! the pony?' was on the tip of his tongue, but pity overcame all other thoughts. 'Mother,' he exclaimed instead, '*Shant* I go home wid'ee, and mak up the vire vor'ee?'

The tone of kindness was so unexpected, so unusual, that the poor unhappy woman nearly broke down; but she dared not let him come. She must be alone. She was puzzled, fearful and suspicious. So she refused his friendly offer, and turned off to her lonely dwelling.

'Poor old body,' pondered Bob, as he trudged on alone. 'well, es'll be back by the end of next week, and then may be Kit and I can help her zummut.'

'Kind lad,' thought she; 'but I'm glad he'll be away till it'll all be over—one way or the other. He knows too much, and fancies too much, to be safe for me. I must be alone.'

And she moved wearily on through the snow, which

had been falling thickly for more than an hour, and adding itself to that already fallen on Christmas morn. It impeded her progress, and made her sadly wet. At length she reached her own door, and unhooking the key from its place of concealment, she opened and entered. Her fire had long ago burnt out ; no comfort could be got out of that black heap in the grate, without more exertion than she was equal to just then. No being, not even a cat or a dog, was present to welcome her ; no sense, but that of chilliness prevailed her dark comfortless dwelling. Depressed already, perhaps almost as much by reaction, after the excitement of the day, as by actual fatigue, the present misery was more than she could bear. She sank down on the seat by her cold hearth, and burying her face in her hands, she gave way to a burst of sobbing, fearfully violent while it lasted. After it had passed, she still sat on, mournfully musing, until, completely chilled, she sought her bed. Into it she crept, without being at the trouble of preparing food for herself, or even of boiling herself water for a cup of tea,—with no warmth, nothing to soothe her awful loneliness, the miserable woman lay down. No thought of the loving care that watches over the poorest was in her heart. How could it be ! How could she throw herself with unreserved trust on the care of One, who knew the true tale of that woeful night upon the shore !

And she had been for so long, concealing and striving to forget that truth, bent on obtaining gains thus most wickedly ‘come by,’ and she was now arranging to tempt others, two young children, into sin !

Trust in the Almighty could not be for her. Sin was too near her—it was all horrible, horrible. Why was it that old compunctions and recollections, smothered so long, would rise up and vex her on this night, when of

all others, she wanted repose? But at length, tired out, she found refuge in sleep. But she slept uneasily; her brain was full of confused fancies, until at length they arranged themselves into a vivid dream.

She had returned to her first home; again she lived the life of her childhood; again she romped with her favourite brother; again indulged in her old daring acts of disobedience, so delightful, because forbidden; again she passed through the sobering sorrow of her brother's departure, and the more solemn period of a sister's death. She recalled the very scenes, the couch of rest by the open bay window, with the honeysuckle twining in (she had loved the scents ever since), and herself seated in the deep window seat; the white death-bed, the pretty bedroom, and her sister's words of hope that they might meet again. She moved uneasily here, but soon she dreamed on.

This time another scene unfolded itself before her fancy. She walked, in secret, with one, whom she was forbidden to meet, whom she knew to be bad. Yet she walked on alone with him, on and on. How vividly it all returned to her! She even seemed to be saying to herself—*Never mind, I will stop, when I like.* Vain woman. But in sleep, as it had been in life, she seemed whirled on from sin to sin; from wilfulness to unfaithfulness; to lying, to conniving at sin, and then concealing such sin, until she awoke in an agony of distress, lest she should be discovered!

She awoke, and behold it was a dream! But how vivid and how true! How awfully she had been swept on, and what had it ended in—utter desolation. What must it end in! unless she stopped now. She had not secured Hotspur nor Grace. Something within told her there was still time to pause. Mother O'Neill contemplated the possibility for one moment. Then she sprang

up, as if she had been stung, and set herself to light her fire and prepare her breakfast, with an energy which seemed in its fierceness and determination an actual driving of good from her. There might be time, but where was the power over her own will!

She was full of pain, from the exposure of the previous evening ; body and mind were alike in distress, but she would not take the only course that could have led to peace. Rather she felt more determined than ever to pursue her scheme to its end.





CHAPTER IX.

A CHAPTER OF DISAPPOINTMENTS.

'Fie, fie ! unknot that threatening unkind brow ;
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes,
It blots thy beauty, as frosts bite the meads ;
Confounds thy fame, as whirlwinds shake fair buds ;
And in no sense is meet, or amiable.'

Shakespeare.



SABEL had passed this Saturday in a very different manner from mother O'Neill ; and, indeed, in a very different manner from what she had herself intended.

Her first hope, on awakening, had been that she might find some opportunity of talking with Grace. Mrs Thirswell had chanced to be present in the room during Isabel's visit to her mother on the previous afternoon ; and her remarks had immeasurably increased Isabel's pity for a sister so lonely and oppressed.

It was so evident that her nurse's prejudice and annoyance left Grace no chance of retrieving her character, that in a fit of desperation Isabel betrayed her earnest wish that nurse Thirswell ' would go.'

But she was sufficiently punished for her imprudence.

Her mother had fussed herself quite ill when nurse was hired, and she retained a vivid remembrance of the pain still. She had reposed in peace under nurse's wing

ever since, and was not going to be exposed now for the very distant chance of making Grace good. Not that she exactly expressed all this, even to herself ; but the effect was the same.

And the enormity of Isabel's idea brought on, by the time the morning appeared, so furious a headache, that Isabel was forced to resign all other tasks, and attend upon her mother. Even for her meals, nothing but Mrs Walpole's undisputed authority procured her leave to join the family party at them ; and for the night, Isabel arranged to occupy her father's dressing-room, so loth was Mrs M'Ivor to part with her.

So all chance of speaking to Grace was cut off. But it may be doubted whether Grace was a great loser by this imprisonment of Isabel. Probably any direct attempt to seek her confidence would only have resulted in lessening Isabel's influence, or increasing Grace's bad temper. It was better, very likely, that her admiration for her sister should increase, as it were, at a distance, than that she should incur the sin of again repulsing her, a fault that now did humble poor Grace, but which, as yet, when the temptation to it came, she was certain to commit. But whether better for her or not, Isabel was lost to her for nearly the whole of Saturday, to her and to everybody else.

There was another person in the house, besides her mother, who would gladly, if she could, have engrossed all Isabel's time ; and this was Amy. This sweet-tempered little maiden had never in her life met anybody at all like her cousin, and her affection for her was most enthusiastic. She felt dreadfully aggrieved all the day, but especially during the morning, as hour after hour passed on, and Isabel did not appear for their usual reading. She tried very hard to be dutifully sorrow for her aunt's pain, but

she was a great deal more sorry for herself, and she moped about in a manner most unusual to her happy self. In this state she was found by her mother. A mother who had never been known to allow megrins and melancholy in her children in her life.

‘Why—Amy ! what can the matter be ? You look as if your wits were frozen. My dear child, do get something to do ; you have been moping about for the last hour.’

‘Oh, mamma ; Isabel says, she will come for reading every day, and I am waiting for her.’

‘But you may wait, my dear. She can’t leave your aunt. Don’t you know how bad her head is ?’

‘Yes—mamma.’

‘I don’t suppose Isabel can come all day. You must give the reading up, or read without her. Can you do either, my dear, the last perhaps ?’

Amy’s eyes filled with tears. ‘No ! not well mamma. We can’t do well without Isabel.’

‘Of course not ; but if you can’t have Isabel, what’s to be done then ?’

‘I can wait and see, mamma.’

‘Nonsense, my child ; you cannot dawdle away a whole morning waiting for your cousin. Now, look here, Amy, how long does this reading take ?’

‘Just half an hour, generally.’

‘Very well. And who reads ?’

‘Isabel, mamma,’ said Amy, in a tone that implied it to be a very needless question.

Her mother smiled as she asked again, ‘and who listens, Amy ?’

‘I do ; and Grace, when we can get her.’

‘When she is not in the press, you mean,’ Mrs

Walpole began, but she checked herself. 'Then run, my dear child, and fetch Grace, and we'll have the reading now. I can give you the time, and be reader. Then I have a parcel to send to old widow Green, and a note to the Campbells. Hexley is going to carry them, and you and Grace can walk with her. It will be a good employment for you both. Quick, my dear child,—what are you waiting for?' exclaimed her mother, as Amy still lingered.

'Why,—Amy,' she continued, as she caught sight of her child's reluctant face. 'Don't you like the plan?'

'It will *spoil* the book, mamma,' said poor Amy.

'Spoil the book; my reading—,' her mother all but said. It was the first time, the very first, that any one had so manifestly come between the parent and child. And for the moment a pang of—shall we call it by the hideous name of jealousy?—passed across Mrs Walpole's heart to be checked, however, instantly and sternly. Yet she paused for a second, before she replied: 'True, my dear, so it may. Then I can find some other story, just for the half hour. Will that do, little Amy?'

Amy replied only by flinging her arms round her kind mother's neck, and covering her with kisses. Then she seated herself, big baby as she was, on her lap, and poured out all her admiration and love for Isabel. Mrs Walpole listened cordially, delighting in her child's confidence, and approving of every word she uttered. At length she said:

'You know, Amy, if we are to read we must stop chattering. I really have not time for both, because if I don't get my work done, I shall not be able to release Isabel from her attendance for luncheon, or anything else.'

'Oh, mamma, never mind!—Oh, well, yes, then, per-

‘haps I ought to go ; only I do like talking and telling you all so much ; and mamma, you like Isabel as much as I do, I know.’

‘I like her extremely. I think Grace is very fortunate to have such a sister ; they are so unlike,’ added Mrs Walpole, musingly, ‘and not unnaturally either.’

‘Grace is very odd, indeed,’ said Amy, emphatically.

‘She is—very. I can do nothing with her ; she is afraid of me, I think.’

‘Yes, mamma. That the oddest part of all.’

‘That’s what you ought to be, do you know, Amy,’ said her mother, looking brightly up in her child’s face.

‘Well, mamma ;—but I can’t—.’

‘Ho !’ said the mother. ‘I am afraid that I have brought you up very badly, Amy. But, tell me,’ added Mrs Walpole, after a moment’s thought, ‘*can* you tell me anything about Grace ? She puzzles me. How came she in the press ? and how came she to be talking with mother O’Neill ? and why did her father send her to bed on Christmas eve ? Were they all separate scrapes, or had they any connection ?’

‘I do not know about the press business, mamma. I rather fancy that Grace gets in there because she is so cold.’

‘Cold ! my dear ; and how can the press warm her ?’

‘The rugs and cloaks are all there ; auntie’s fur cloak, and all.’

‘Oh ! I see ! that explains it ; then it is not all oddity and naughtiness, poor little girl.’

‘Then about the going to bed. Grace was crying over the Indian pictures, and her tears fell on them, and blotted them, and uncle George was very angry.’

‘Yes ; they are his wife’s doing. So, poor child, that

was not naughtiness either, exactly. What made her cry over the pictures?

‘She told me not to say—.’

Mrs Walpole considered a moment. ‘But, Amy, do you know, I think you had better. Grace is so peculiar, and so few people understand her, that I think it would be a real kindness to explain what seems odd in her conduct.’

‘If you think so, mamma. She was crying over the picture of that ayah; the one so like mother O’Neill. It was her own old ayah, she said, and she seemed very fond of her. She burst into tears as soon as she caught sight of the picture. I don’t think Mrs Thirswell is very kind to Grace, mamma.’

‘I suspect Grace is extremely unmanageable, Amy; but I can imagine nurse Thirswell might be hard upon her. But now, my dear, you must go and seek your cousin, and get out with Hexley (the nursemaid). It will be too late if you do not go.’

Amy kissed her mother, and complied, tripping away with a light and merry step. Mrs Walpole also rose, and gathering up her keys, letters, etc., etc., she likewise left the room. She felt much more cordially towards her little niece, because of all Amy had said. Even the talk with mother O’Neill she could excuse, because of the likeness to the ayah.

Amy soon discovered Grace, and dragged her away to dress, chattering busily all the time. At first Grace strongly objected to the cold out of doors, but when she found that the nursery, with Mrs Thirswell, or the library, with her formidable aunt, or the school-room, with possibly one or both of the boys, and sundry of the elder children, were the possible alternatives, she prepared, with tolerable

willingness, for her walk. She listened with surprise to Amy's chatter about her mamma's proposal to read, it was so unlike anything she could ever have said; but she made no reply, only put on her boots, buttoned up her jacket, and adjusted her hat in silence. It was this practice of her's, this listening without making any reply, which Amy thought so especially odd of her cousin. Amy was perfectly ready to do all the talking, but it silenced even her to meet with no response. However, the girls had no sooner started with their blooming bonny companion Hexley, than Amy had to keep her tongue in full work to keep up with Hexley's. They chattered apace, both of them; and Grace could walk quietly on, listening to both, and enjoying the beauty of the bright frosty scene around her, with no necessity to say anything.

Before long the boys joined them, and though they protested against the possibility of 'taking a walk' with them, and detailed all manner of enterprises that they were just going to begin, they nevertheless did accompany their sisters for the greater part of the way. Many guests were to come on Monday for the week. It had already been found necessary to banish Tom to the tower with Roger, and much arrangement was necessary to accommodate all the arrivals. The Jackson's brought a girl and a boy; Milly Davies came with her mother; Ruth Glenlyon with two little sisters, a brother, and her parents; and the Howards had begged to bring little Jenny with Fanny, besides the boys of the family, three in number. 'You know it is so hard, dear Mrs Walpole, to leave little Jane all alone at home!' Mrs Walpole grumbled, but consented, and Hexley was now carrying a similar reply to a similar request from the Campbells. These had not four children, as Colonel Walpole had asserted, but three; one

of which had been at a French school, but had suddenly, and to Mrs Walpole, very inconveniently, returned for the holidays, so she must be asked also! 'Dreadful! where can I put them all!' exclaimed the bewildered mistress of the mansion.

'Oh! somewhere, my dear,' replied her husband, by way of assisting her.

Of course all the approaching fun provided a multitude of subjects for the children's talk during their walk. The ice was likely to be firm by Monday, or at least Tuesday. Shooting was provided for the gentlemen on Wednesday and Thursday; rabbiting for the boys on Friday, for which Bob Dacres had been secured through the medium of his wife. Wednesday and Thursday evenings were engaged by the two feasts,—the servants' and the children's; on Friday a distant cover would be shot by the elders; on Saturday there would be fun somewhere for certain; Sunday, of course, must be quiet; on Monday they must find some more fun; on Tuesday, everybody went away. Heigh, ho! what a pity that was, to be sure.

Even Grace warmed at these glowing anticipations, and began to think that she should enjoy it all. What a different week it was to be to them, and to mother O'Neill. All blithe and innocent happiness on the one side; gloom and yearning on the other, leading on into sin. It was a pity that such a shadow should cross the path of these happy children! Yet, without temptation, there can be neither struggle nor victory.

No cross no crown. Grace was soon tried.

The children had been discussing the squeeze in the house. 'But Amy, if mother does not know where to put Patty Campbell, why not put her in your room, and put

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you in Grace's?' inquired Tom, after his sister had described her mother's perplexity about her guests.

'Then where will Isabel go?' asked Amy.

'In uncle George's dressing-room. She is going to sleep there to-night, is she not?'

'Only to-night, I believe,' replied Amy. 'But if aunt Fanny should keep her there, what would you say, Grace?'

Grace was frightfully disturbed by the proposal. So she turned sullenly away, giving a short, grumpy reply, that no one could understand, and walked on some steps by herself.

'Oh, Tom, I wish you had not suggested such a thought,' murmured Amy. 'Of course, Grace can't like me instead of Isabel.'

'It was no question of liking, it was a question of room,' responded Tom. 'I only thought of helping my mother.'

But Roger now followed his sister, and urged strongly, and soon impatiently, the convenience it might be to Mrs Walpole, telling Grace that she was bound to consent; but it was entirely in vain. Grace had no mind whatever to agree. She did not care to accommodate her aunt; she was not to be persuaded by Roger; she did not want Amy. So she continued to walk on alone.

The boys soon ran away after their own devices. Tom annoyed, Roger angry; leaving Amy to pursue her walk home with Grace and Hexley.

And Mrs Walpole met them in the hall. She came forward cordially to Grace, and in her pleasantest tone began to explain that this very arrangement had been made for her and Amy, by herself. Finding that Grace did not respond as willingly as she had expected, Mrs Walpole kindly told her all the reasons for thus occupying

her niece's bed-room, and ended by almost asking for her consent.

Grace scarcely even growled in reply! She turned sulkily away, and finding her aunt said no more, walked straight off upstairs.

Amy stood looking after her in dismay. Her mother was really angry, too angry to say more than 'this arrangement is not to be altered, Amy. You will sleep there to-night.'

'Yes mamma!' answered Amy, hurriedly; and whilst Mrs Walpole moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, she betook herself upstairs.

'Dear, dear, dear!' she thought, as she ran along, 'how unlucky Grace always is; and how disagreeable for me to sleep with her for a week. What shall we do together?'

She ran straight to her room, and found it in great confusion. All her things were being removed to Grace's, and clean sheets were being put into the bed for the visitor. Hexley's bonnet and shawl were already off, and she was busily effecting the change.

'Oh!' exclaimed Amy. 'So soon? Why, you are quick.'

'Yes, Miss Amy! You are to sleep with Miss Grace after all! I would not be you, Miss, for something; it's my opinion you will have a very contrary bed-fellow.'

'I must do my best,' replied Amy. 'I am very sorry for poor Grace.'

'Humph! I'd be more sorry for myself,' cried Hexley, as she marched off with a drawer full of collars.

'I don't know,' thought Amy. 'I am never so unhappy as when I am cross; and Grace is never anything

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else. How unhappy she must be !' exclaimed the child aloud. 'Oh ! I really must do all I can to comfort her. She must be sorry to lose Isabel. I am sure I should be !'

And little Amy followed Hexley with another portion of her possessions, full of her determination to comfort her cousin, if she could, under the infliction of her presence !





CHAPTER X.

A PARTIAL THAW.

'Cross patch! shut the latch,
Sit by the fire and spin!'

Nursery Rhyme.



UT as Hexley afterwards told the Walpoles' nurse! 'tweren't no manner of good! Miss Grace was for all the world just like a piece of cold steel; and for all Miss Amy was going about so soft and gentle like, and asked her so kindly where she liked her to put away her things, Miss Grace wouldn't give no answer at all, nor even turn round to see.' Hexley 'would like to have shaken her well out of such tantrums, as she stood stock still by the window a-looking out; and she did admire Miss Amy uncommon, but for all that she would not be her, to sleep with Miss Grace;—no! not for a whole pound!'

It was quite true that Grace took no notice of her cousin's advances. Indeed, she so chilled little Amy, that after some attempts to comfort and appease her, the child desisted in despair. Grace changed her walking dress, and brushed her hair in determined silence, and then left the room. Amy felt strangely inclined to cry; but she

remembered how little even her dear mamma's assistance could make up for Isabel's absence that morning; and she considered that as it was only her small self, it was no wonder that Grace was so vexed. Still, Amy could not but feel that Grace was very cross. Then the thought struck her, that dinner and luncheon had to be got through, and mamma was angry! And Amy devoutly wished she was not so hungry, and might have stayed away. Even Grace's press, in the corner, might have had its charms for her just then.

But the warning gong rang, and Amy hurried off. She wondered at Grace's courage to venture in by herself; but she soon found that her cousin did not possess so much as she supposed. Grace was standing at a window in the hall, half hidden by a curtain, and surreptitiously watching for a convoy into the dining-room. Isabel was the person she had hoped to catch; but her aunt had just passed from the drawing-room, and as she was Isabel's 'relief,' Grace gathered the unwelcome truth that Isabel was going to lunch upstairs. Then Amy appeared, who could ill shelter her cousin; but she was better than nobody, and Grace followed her carelessly. Amy divined her object, and moreover being very glad herself of company, she waited for her at the dining-room door, and both girls entered together. Tom and Roger were already there, settling into their places, or acting footmen for the company generally, according as they were wanted or not. They were of course unconscious of any public trouble. But the sullen looks of Gracey, and the awed silence of Amy, had their natural effect on all the young ones. No one ventured to chatter, except under their breath, and as for laughing, there was almost a cry of 'hush,' when Billy burst into a shout about something or other.

Mamma, too, was alarmingly grave.

'What's up?' inquired Tom, as soon as the children had gathered in the school-room.

'Oh! never mind,' exclaimed Amy, with a sigh of relief. 'I'm so glad it's over!'

'But! has there been a breeze, then, anywhere?'

'Something like it,' replied Amy. 'I have to sleep with Grace; but don't say anything about it.'

'Oh—!' said Tom, 'but mamma is quite angry!'

'Yes, Grace would not say a word when mamma asked her. I can't think how it is, Tom!'

'I can,' quoth Tom; 'Grace ought to be fed on bread and water for a week,—that's how it is. She is just about the crossdest girl that I ever saw.'

'Oh, hush,' whispered Amy, 'there's Roger. I hope he has not heard.'

'I don't know,' said Tom, wearily. 'It's a new thing here to be always having these bothers. I'm quite tired of them.'

'Is Grace here?' inquired a voice at the door.

'Mamma! oh!' exclaimed both children, in dismay.

'Is Grace here?' repeated Mrs Walpole, opening the door further.

'No, aunt!' replied Roger, in a voice of extreme vexation; 'but I will go and seek for her;' and he passed his aunt as she made way for him at the door.

'Oh, mamma,' cried poor little Amy, unable to check the tears any longer. 'Don't be angry with Grace; pray don't be angry with Grace, please mamma. I'll do all I can, and I am going to the room.'

'My dear Amy,' said her mother gravely, 'I am not going to have this week made a week of misery to you by that cross girl; besides, it is not right to allow of such

temper, for Grace's own sake I must speak ; I must stop it.'

'But she is unhappy about Isabel ; and you know how cross I was this morning, too, about her. Mamma, dear, I won't be miserable, if you won't be angry. Oh, mamma, don't.'

Her mother looked fondly on the damp imploring face. 'Oh, Amy,' she said, 'what are we to do with this girl ? I really think I ought to speak to help Isabel.'

'Isabel dreads a quarrel between you and Grace more than anything,' cried Amy.

'A quarrel between me and Grace !' echoed her mother. 'Indeed, Amy——;' but she paused. Grace was a puzzle to her. 'You run away, little woman, and let me speak to her alone. Perhaps we shall do better alone !'

'I'm gone !' cried Tom, who had only tarried from a sort of chivalric feeling for his sister, and a slight curiosity on his own account ; but who was now by his mother's words, aroused to the fact that he had much better get out of the way. He suited the action to the word, by bolting at once. Amy was following him, but she turned such a pleading, imploring look on her mother, that the latter exclaimed, as she kissed her: 'My darling, I wish nobody would be crosser than you !'

'Perhaps, mamma, I might sleep in the tower, if Grace dislikes having me so very much ?'

'No, my child, certainly not ; now, go,' and Amy left the room.

Mrs Walpole had still to wait some little time before Grace and Roger made their appearance. Roger's countenance expressed distress and annoyance enough, as he brought his sister in.

Indeed, he had had no slight trouble in getting her there at all. Nothing but the threat of calling Mrs Walpole had prevailed, and the flushed faces of both children betrayed that the struggle had been severe. Roger now left her in his aunt's charge, with a glance towards the delinquent, of most righteous indignation, which Grace repaid by a scowl of defiance. But she instantly recalled the lady's presence, and smothered her resentment under an exterior of impenetrable sullenness.

Roger left the room. Mrs Walpole stood at the fireplace, and Grace near the door, both in perfect silence for a minute or two. Grace's eyes were fixed on the ground, and she did not perceive the keen observation with which her aunt's were fixed upon her. She had come down, armed for a struggle, in which she expected that her usual weapon, unbroken silence, would give her a sort of victory. But her aunt seemed to be trying the same game! A minute passed—another, and another—and no sound broke the silence, save an occasional rustle of Mrs Walpole's dress, just loud enough to betoken her presence. It began to be oppressive; still a minute, and another minute! or what seemed an age; and Grace got very nervous. At length she looked up, and found her aunt's eye fixed upon her, with an expression of amused inquiry, instead of wrath, as Grace's expected.

'Well, Grace,' said she, 'are you going to speak first, or am I? Isabel is afraid we shall quarrel, and Amy is afraid to leave us together. Now, as we are going to live together for some weeks, it won't do to be so like fire and water as that, will it, my dear? So now come and sit near me, and we will have a talk together; come here, my dear, near me on the sofa.'

And Mrs Walpole's tone, though very good-tempered,

and almost playful, yet had a note of command in it that Grace was obliged to obey.

She approached the sofa, and was about to seat herself at the utmost distance that it would allow ; but her aunt caught her nearer, and exclaiming :

‘Nonsense, child,’ she encircled her waist with one arm, and drew her quite close. The grasp was irresistibly firm, though not tight or fondling ; this might come, perhaps ! Grace had never been so compelled to obey in her life. She had been worried, and driven, and bullied often enough, but this was something quite new, and she resigned herself to her fate. She could do nothing else. But what was to come next ? Nothing that she expected.

‘Grace,’ began Mrs Walpole, ‘can you tell me whether your mother often has such fearful headaches as these ? This attack is so very severe.’

How could Grace persist in silence.

‘Mamma has had them more than once,’ replied she.

‘And have you ever nursed her through one ? Neither Isabel nor I know exactly what to do.’

‘Yes, aunt,’ replied Grace, ‘I did nurse her through one. Papa was away,’ she continued, to an inquiring look from her aunt, ‘and nurse was busy with baby, and Roger could do nothing, so I was obliged to.’

‘And what did you do ? Had you a doctor ?’

‘He came for a few minutes, but somebody was dying, and he was obliged to go.’

‘So you were alone. What remedies did you use then ? Can you remember them ?’

‘Oh, yes !’ and Grace unhesitatingly ran on, detailing all that she had done, a good deal of which had been well and promptly done.

This subject gradually led to another—the Indian life,

and in time the ayah was mentioned. Mrs Walpole inquired about her with great apparent carelessness, lest so near approach to an object of deep affection should shut Grace up suddenly. She spoke of her, also, with slight disparagement, in the hope that Grace would be warmed in her defence ; and Grace caught the bait. She was soon describing the virtues of her beloved nurse, with an enthusiasm which Mrs Walpole had no idea she possessed.

‘ I hear mother O’Neill is like her ? ’ the latter remarked at last.

Grace started. The words recalled a transgression ; but the arm round her waist was as firmly supporting as ever, and the tone as free from blame. Grace stole a glance into her aunt’s face ; there was no reproof there either. So, reassured, she ventured on :

‘ Yes, something like, and yet not at all like ! not so nice near—.’

‘ No ! of course not, this ayah had nursed you. But Grace, I did wish to speak to you about mother O’Neill. What your uncle said the other day had this reason in it . . . ’ and Mrs Walpole was beginning to recount the ill-doings of Mother O’Neill and her family, when she was interrupted by her husband’s voice, loudly calling for her. She was too good a wife not to answer instantly, and as the calling continued, not to rise and seek him ; but it is not to be said that she did not feel the interruption was most inopportune.

Colonel Walpole wanted her advice on some trivial matter. But he detained her several minutes ; and when she returned to finish her talk with Grace, the bird had flown. The necessity of remaining, and the soothing manner that Mrs Walpole had used towards her, had detained Grace a not unwilling prisoner ; but once free, and

recalled to her own dread by her aunt's departure, Grace flew to her retreats again, and was beyond recall when Mrs Walpole returned.

This lady was sadly vexed. She had effected nothing positive, except perhaps the security that Grace would never again personally dispute her will ; and perhaps she had lessened, in some degree, the child's reserve ; but it was all as nothing to what she had meant to do. She stood before the fire, uncertain what next step to take. There seemed none possible, except to relieve Isabel, and send her to her sister, whilst the ice was a little broken. And on this idea Mrs Walpole acted immediately. She met Roger as she left the room. He had been lingering about, ashamed and restless. He had expected every moment to see the door open, and his aunt walk away in one direction, and Grace dash off in another, like two explosives. And he had seen no such thing.

His aunt had come forth at her husband's call ; and immediately afterwards Grace slipped up-stairs with a more *sunshiny* air than he had seen for ages. So he now met his aunt with hope.

Unfortunately she forgot at the moment under what circumstances they had parted, and failed to re-assure him. On the contrary, the sight of him made her inquiry hastily : ' Where is Grace gone, do you know ? why did she not wait ! it is *very* provoking.' Upon which Roger shrank away, and disappeared with speed, thereby recalling his aunt to what she had done.

He overtook his sister somewhere very shortly afterwards, and burst into these reproving words :

' Grace ! it is of no use ! we must be miserable, whilst you won't do it !'

' Won't do what ?' exclaimed Grace, in surprise.

'Won't do anything,' retorted her brother; 'here's aunt Jane as vexed as ever. You make nothing but quarrels. Tom says so!'

'I don't care for Tom or you either,' cried Grace angrily, recalled by his very presence to a sense of all her wrongs; and, turning indignantly from him, the two parted.

'Isabel, there's a fate in it,' exclaimed aunt Jane, stealing softly to the girl's side, in the sick-room. 'I was interrupted just before I could say anything to Grace, when I had got her into the humour to listen. And I have vexed Roger, and if he meets her, she'll be out of temper again for a week! Go, my dear, at once, and see if you can find her, and speak now. She is better than I thought; but it is all so unlucky!'

And Mrs Walpole took the seat by the sleeping invalid; whilst Isabel hurried away.

Where was she to find Grace? and what was she to say, thus suddenly called upon? Had anything fresh happened about mother O'Neill, or what? Isabel especially dreaded that woman's influence over her sister, since her uncle's anger. She hurried on now, distressed and anxious, seeking for Grace. It was a bitter afternoon; for a high easterly wind had sprung up, with heavy snow-clouds. Isabel drew her cloak closely round her, as she entered the shrubby walk, feeling that it was enough to make any child cross, to come from India, and plunge into such weather as this. She had scarcely entered it, before she perceived Grace standing at the old vista; and the sight of her, so slightly clothed, caused fresh anxiety.

'Grace, dear!' she called loudly, 'come in, come in! it is too cold for you to be here. Come under my cloak; here, Grace, here! you must be frozen to death.'

Grace looked up, but there was no brightening in the

look, nor did she move to accept Isabel's offer. But her sister was now by her side; she threw her cloak over her, inwrapping both, and pressed Grace to her side. There was little response, only submission, and the two girls moved towards the house.

'You must be half frozen, Grace,' said Isabel anxiously.

The poor girl muttered some inaudible reply.

'Why did you come here, dear, on such a bitter afternoon? It is not weather to be out. Indeed, Grace, you will make yourself ill, if you run such risks; you have nothing on for out of doors.'

'It matters to no one if I do,' returned Grace gloomily.

'Indeed it does, Grace, indeed it does! why do you fancy such things?'

'How can I help fancying what everybody tells me? I can't like what everybody else likes, and so I make everybody miserable. Roger says so—everybody says so—.'

'I never have, Grace.'

'No, but you think it; you know you do.'

'I cannot help being anxious, Grace, sometimes; because I—you—,' and Isabel paused, not knowing what to say.

'Because I am very cross, and always in scrapes,' said her sister, 'which I can't help.'

'I know it is very difficult for you; but are you in any fresh scrape now?' returned Isabel.

'Yes; I am. They've turned you out of our room; and they are all angry because I don't like it,' growled poor Grace.

'Who is angry? I have heard nothing about it, my dear,' replied Isabel, pressing her sister closer to herself, for this expression of love was precious.

'Don't you know? you sleep in papa's dressing-room,

and Amy comes into ours ; and it is to be so all this week, while all these horrid strangers are here. I shan't see you anywhere.'

'You can come into mamma's room, when you like.'

'Oh, no !' exclaimed Grace abruptly, 'I'd rather not,' adding, after an instant's pause, which Isabel was puzzled to fill up, 'papa will be there, and Roger, and mamma. I'd rather not.'

Isabel remembered with pain her father's harshness to Grace, and she thought it also extremely probable that their mother would seize on such an opportunity to lecture her ; yet if she could get her to meet Roger on peaceable terms, it might go far to remove her aversion to him.

'No,' continued Grace, blurting out her words, 'You have been—well, I don't know what ;—but I don't feel all a lump of wickedness when I am with you, as I do with everybody else. You aint unkind, nor is mother O'Neill, nor is aunt Walpole quite—but I don't care about her, and I'm not to speak to mother O'Neill, so uncle says——.'

'Yes ; and indeed, Grace, you must mind him.'

'Hm !' snorted the other, 'and if they take away you, I shall talk to her, that's all.'

'Grace, Grace !' exclaimed Isabel, 'how can I help you, if you are so determined to be wilful and lonely. Come into the dressing-room ; I will come there when I can.'

'And you will be alone—and not let Roger come !'

'It is very unlikely that he will ; but I could not turn him out.'

'Then I won't come.'

'Grace, Grace, is this kind to me ? why must I vex one or other of you ?'

'Let me go,' replied Grace moodily. 'I always have.'

'Indeed I shall not,' responded her sister ; 'and Grace,

is it not partly your own fault? nay—you must not break away so—you will be lonely, and you will not obey. What can we do?’

‘Isabel, what is the good of your talking. You never get into scrapes, and everybody loves you. You *can’t* understand.’

‘Perhaps not entirely,’ replied her sister. ‘But here are two positive duties that you can do. You can avoid that bad woman, and you can try to be amiable with Roger. You must not hold any intercourse with her. I am sure that you must not, on any account; it quite frightens me to think of her. And about Roger—now do listen, Gracey. Do try to check your feelings towards him. They can’t be right. For my sake, come and meet him good-temperedly. Come, Grace,’ repeated Isabel, as she caught and smoothed and kissed her sister’s face as they unwrapped in the hall.

‘I won’t promise,’ replied Grace, returning the kiss, however, with unusual readiness.

‘No; but you will try, for me? I cannot bear it, Grace, when I see you in trouble—I cannot indeed.’

‘I won’t promise,’ repeated the girl.

‘But you will perform, which is better. Yes, aunt, yes, I’m coming,’ she cried, as she heard her aunt’s voice calling her.

‘You two silly things,’ exclaimed their aunt, ‘Go and warm yourselves; one would think you had no perception of cold—dawdling up to the house like snails in such weather as this. Go, Gracey, and get warm, or I shall shut you in the press among the rugs if you don’t take care.’

Grace’s eye brightened at this cheerful threat about one of her delinquencies. Altogether she was comforted, and she followed Isabel into the school-room to get warmed by

the fire and hot tea, before Isabel should return to her mother's room.

Roger was there also, and for that short time the three were comfortable and cosy together by the fire. Isabel could not help wishing for such a warm refuge for both brother and sister more frequently ; but it was not to be expected that, with the many warmed rooms all over the house, one extra should be kept up for those three alone.

Isabel at length returned to her mother, Roger repaired to the turning-room, and Grace was left to herself, basking over the fire. She was in a fair way to become thawed, mind and body ; and safe too, if she would listen to Isabel's advice, of escaping any perilous fall.

And the thaw lasted into Sunday, because Isabel then obtained for her the great comfort of remaining cosily in her mother's room unrebuked, when all repulsive terrifying people were safe at morning church.

Isabel had pondered earnestly over the possibility of doing this, and had at length determined to try on her own authority. Therefore, when Mrs Walpole came ready dressed for church, to relieve her for a few minutes, Isabel asked, in a whisper, 'Where is Grace?'

'I am sure I have not the remotest idea,' was the answer.

'I shall get her in here, aunt, for the morning, if you can wait one minute.'

'Well, you are a bold girl !' cried her aunt, glancing at the invalid.

'Grace is sure to be silent and still, aunt. Mamma will scarcely observe her. Just fancy nurse and the nursery !'

'Indeed—yes—well, go quickly. I can wait.'

Isabel soon returned with her stray sheep, whom she had rescued from a miserable moping over the nursery-fire (for Grace had caught a slight cold the evening before),

and whom she introduced on tip-toe, setting a chair close to the fire, and giving her a fine Bible with pictures.

Mrs Walpole smiled, and departed ; and, for a long time, the room was perfectly still. Then Mrs M'Ivor's broth came in, and she roused herself.

'Who's that?' she inquired. 'Grace.'

Grace looked up with a glance, very like a wild cat's caught in a flower-bed.

'Oh ! my dear, come here,' cried her mother kindly. 'Do you remember my bad headache in India, and all you did? Isabel, Grace was as good a nurse then as you are now.'

Isabel's look of surprise and joy did then convince Grace that her own joys and sorrows were her sister's also ; and it was so charming to be praised. She stood leaning against the bed-post, until her mother began to dislike the jogging, and to request for stillness and perfect quiet, when the girl withdrew to her chair.

But Isabel's purpose was more than gained, and she felt most thankful.





CHAPTER XI.

COUNTERPLOTING.

‘Through all the drama,
 women guide the plot.’

SHERIDAN—*Epilogue to ‘The Rivals.’*



T was a damp, gloomy morning, that Sunday. The snow was still falling fast, and the wind howling over the expanse of white ground; nor did the leaden-coloured sky give any prospect of clearing up.

Mother O’Neill’s cottage felt as desolate as the weather. She moved wearily about, trying to ignite some damp sticks, but her limbs ached with pain, and her deliberate choice of sin weighed heavily on her spirit.

She succeeded, at length, in preparing her breakfast, and sat down to it, mentally occupied in arranging her plans for success. ‘She had not secured Hotspur; she had not secured Grace; there was still time to——’. Pish! what trick was conscience playing her? there was *no* time to pause; none, if she would see her husband and boys again; none, if she did not mean to abide in that hut for ever! no—no—she must press on and on, or the week would pass, and all be hopeless. She could secure Hot-

spur by a promise of the pony ; he would not discover its falsity in three days ; but how about Grace ?

She pondered long. Could she have met Grace, she would have had no doubt of re-arousing her annoyance against Roger ; but she gathered from the lapse of so many days since their meeting, that Grace had been forbidden to come, probably to hold any intercourse with her, and if so, she could only get at her through Hotspur, in whose bungling she had no trust.

She must see him, however, and try. But she must keep herself out of sight, especially of Bob and Mrs Thirswell. Neither could she wait until Monday night, when they met by appointment ; but she would spend that morning near Walpole Hall ; it was not unlikely that he would take advantage of everybody's being at church, and himself being supposed there, to pay its environs a visit. She would go and see.

So she clad herself in her red cloak—Jem's last gift ; and as the hour for service approached, left her habitation, and sheltered, by narrow lanes and high hedges, drew towards Walpole Hall.

As she approached, she saw with great satisfaction, nearly the whole family troop forth to church. Isabel was not among them, nor Grace, nor Mrs Thirswell, nor some of the younger children, and the observance of this fact warned mother O'Neill to avoid the house side of the tower, because, as she knew, the M'Ivor's nursery, and Mrs M'Ivor's bed-room and dressing-room looked upon it. But why did she want to go nearer the tower ? She knew almost every stone in it. She knew where Grace was to deposit the key—why run any risk ? She was safe where she was ; she had better remain there.

But it is doubtful whether her increasing restlessness

would have allowed her to do so, had she not become aware of another figure creeping cautiously along behind the hedge of the walk in which she stood. It was Hotspur, bent on his fool's errand of circumventing the old woman, and arranging his plots by himself.

She divined his object; and her conviction that he was counter-scheming, destroyed the last remains of compunction at employing him as she wished. She followed him cautiously, just meeting him as he emerged into the shrubbery.

'Good day, Master Montgomery,' she whispered; 'this is better than meeting to-morrow. We have no time to lose.'

Hotspur started on hearing her voice, and endeavoured in vain to conceal how disconcerted he felt at her presence.

Mother O'Neill watched him silently, long enough to make him feel that she had fathomed him. She then continued—

'We have no time to lose; and we have two to deal with instead of one. Young Master Walpole sleeps there, too.'

How *did* mother O'Neill gain her information? No one could ever tell.

'Will you try the game with two there?' she inquired, 'or will ye give it all up? Maybe ye won't like to frighten Master Walpole.'

'Indeed! but I would! he is almost worse than Roger.'

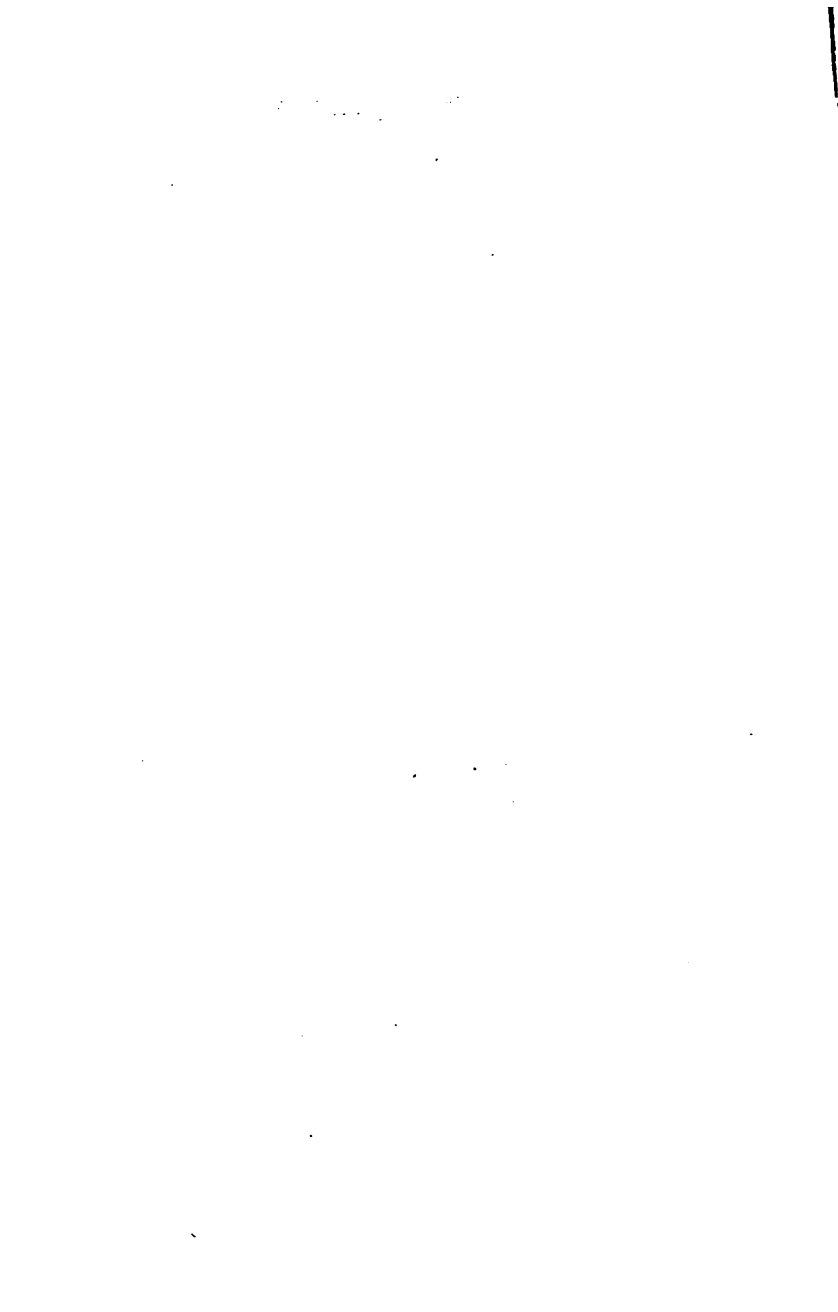
'And there ain't much to fear, as both will be abed and asleep. . . The pony can be had, master, in a few days; but his price is L.9. I went about it yesterday.'

'Did you name me?' inquired Hotspur, nervously.

'No! d'ye take me for a fool? not but what, when that pony comes, I must pay; and then, if I haven't the price



MOTHER O'NEILL AND HOTSPUR.



handy I'll have to name you ; no one will trust me with him.'

'When is he coming?' asked the boy, anxiously.

'About Friday,' was the unhesitating reply. 'The man was to start, first thing this morning, and he would return Thursday or Friday.'

'But the money, mother?'

'That's all right, unless you're frightened, and daren't try——.'

Hotspur considered for a moment ; then he said, 'I don't see anything to frighten me. I am not going to be known to anybody, and I can get out again as easily as I get in ; and if I help you, you will pay for the pony, that is understood?'

'With your L.6 paid beforehand,' said his companion.

'Before or after?' inquired the boy, 'after would be better, because then we should know all about it.'

'All about what?' retorted the mother impatiently. 'How are we to meet afterwards, especially if there is any hue and cry raised? If that pony is brought to me, I must pay at once, or name you. And where am I to get the L.9 unless you pay me your L.6? No, no, I'll have that money to-morrow afternoon, every shilling of it, or I'll not stir ; and when the pony comes, I'll send him on to your father's stables.'

'You must not !' exclaimed Hotspur. 'I will bring you the money to your cottage to-morrow evening ; but I wish I knew how you would get the rest.'

'That's no concern of yours. Only you help me into that tower, and keep those young masters busy for an hour or so, and I'll get you the money. I promise you, Master Hotspur, I'm not going to get into the house itself, indeed I can't from that tower, and I am not going to hurt

anybody, I leave that to you, sir ; and I'm not going to take anything away that belongs to Colonel Walpole, or that ever did belong to him, or that he knows of. I only want what is as good as my own, and then I'll be off, far away, and you'll never hear nought more of me again, I hope.'

'Are you sure of that?' asked the boy, anxiously.

'Aye, if I succeed, which you must help in, just as I have said ; and ye may consider,' she added, looking very keenly at him, 'that you're just as much bound to me now, about that pony, if I like to tell on ye.'

Hotspur quailed beneath her glance. He was at her command, that he felt, however he might wish to be free ; and he felt too, that she was as conscious of the fact as himself.

There was indeed exultation in her manner as she concluded, 'You must bring the whole L.6 to me to-morrow afternoon ! But there is a job for you to do before then ; a job that you can do, and I cannot. You must see that sister of Roger's, that you hunted out of a cupboard at his bidding——.'

Hotspur started. 'What do you know about that?' he inquired. 'Mother, you know everything.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I do—I know this.'

'But you don't know this right, then !' returned he, exultingly. 'He never bade me do it ; he shook me like a dog for doing it.'

'But he showed you up ; and he had been hunting her in there before you came, and he shook you because his uncle was by, and he chose that you should bear all the blame, as you did. Talk of my not knowing ; it is you that are blind !'

Hotspur felt bewildered. Could she possibly be right ?

as if so, Roger had been ten times worse than he thought. He would punish him indeed. But what, he inquired, was he to do with Grace?

‘Get her to hang the key on the wall, behind that bush, on the left hand side of the door.’

‘But how am *I* to persuade her; I cannot.’

‘Remind her, talk it over with her, that Roger got you and your dog there to worry her; you can complain that he left you in the lurch before Colonel Walpole. You’d have been flogged, you know, if he could have persuaded your father.’

‘Ha!’ cried Hotspur, ‘I hate that sneak.’

‘And well you may. Tell her that you and I can teach him better manners—only don’t say that I want to help, it would frighten her maybe—but that we must have the key to do it. Settle to have it hung there before dark on Wednesday. I have promised to help her about him; only with that old vizen the nurse, and the Colonel, it’s not safe for me to be seen. We must get in on Wednesday or Thursday, and you must get the key—mind! Bid her remember that he will not cease his worry until we make him if she wavers; but promise not to hurt him, only to frighten him, if she is uneasy. She won’t be that! You must do this before to-morrow night.’

‘If I can, I will.’

‘If! and how do you mean to succeed if you don’t? We can’t get in without unlocking the door! Let us make a noise at it, and Roger and Tom will awake, and we shall be caught. Then there’ll be the pony to pay for; unless I have a good time in the tower, I’ll not pay a penny! You must do your part, Master. Do you see?’

‘Yes,’ replied Hotspur; ‘I will speak to her before to-morrow evening, and bring you word. But how about my dress and the dog?’

'Bother both,' exclaimed the woman, 'until we have the key ; time enough then ; we can do nothing without it.'

'But I should like to know what I can be !' remarked he.

'The ghost of the Lady Amy, the lovely Lady Amy,' replied the mother, with a mocking laugh.

'I don't know anything about her. Who was she ?'

'Eh, don't you know ? Then you must be told. She died there of fright—and they ?—I say, Master Montgomery !—I can tell you the tale to-morrow evening ;' but this was evidently not what she was going to add.

'What were you going to say ?' inquired Hotspur.

'Come to-morrow afternoon, and I will tell you ; that and the story, and bring the money. I'll be at home after two. Mind, you must tell me about Grace.'

'We are sure to succeed !' exclaimed Hotspur. 'Between you and me, mother.'

'Well, it depends on you now. I wish it didn't,' she added aside.

'Yes ; I'll frighten him well !'

'*When* you've got in ; mind that. You must manage that, remember. Now, I am going away. I don't want to be seen. You can see the bush, can't you ? (pointing with her hand as she spoke) that one, close to the door, on the left hand ; there is a large nail in the wall there.'

'Yes, I see ; what fun it will be. But I cannot think how I am to see Grace. I am forbidden the house.'

'There will be sliding on the pond to-morrow ; perhaps you can manage it then. But this is your affair. We meet to-morrow, as settled, and you *must* bring news.'

'Yes,' replied he, very doubtfully.

Mother O'Neill departed, shaking her head. It fretted her dreadfully, dealing with this stupid boy.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, and as Hotspur was some

way from his home, and was supposed to be at church, it was necessary for him to be moving shortly. Yet he lingered awhile. He was utterly at a loss how to perform his share of the plot. He really dared not go to Walpole Hall alone. He felt too awkward and angry with both Roger and Tom to encounter them willingly on the pond; even if he got there, he was quite uncertain how he could meet Grace; and supposing he did, still more uncertain what he should say to her, for he could not forget that he had done the deed, however much it might be Roger's fault that he did.

However, the first thing he must do now was to return for luncheon. He was not allowed to be absent from meals without leave, so he started for his home.

And here was a fresh difficulty.

It was manifestly impossible for him to execute any part of the plot, without absence from home for at least two days and a night. On Monday evening, too, he had promised to meet his co-conspirator, and without discovery, or an invitation to the Hall, how ever was he to manage it. His was such dull cunning, it never helped in a pinch.

He trusted to luck, and for once luck favoured him.

He found his mother in the full tide of annoyance at finding every one asked to the Hall but themselves. 'Because of that fuss last week, you may be sure, Sir William! grossly impertinent, to punish our son, Sir William!' she cried. He found her determined on driving thither that very afternoon, despite Sunday, the snow, or the implied prohibition, to call on Mrs M'Ivor, and so, if possible, compel an invitation.

'Wonderful, my lady mother!' thought Hotspur. 'It is precisely what I wanted! only you wouldn't do it if you knew——. How lucky that you don't!'



CHAPTER XII.

THE SKATING PARTY.

'The verdure of the plain lies buried deep
Beneath the dazzling deluge ; and the bents
Of coarser grass upspearing o'er the rest,
Of late unsightly and unseen, now shine
Conspicuous, and in bright apparel clad,
And, fledg'd with icy feathers, nod superb.'

Cowper.



WO hours afterwards—and Hotspur and Grace were seated *tête-a-tête* before a delicious fire in the library at Walpole Hall. They had been told to be agreeable to each other. And they had no chance of being interrupted for a good hour. Lady Montgomery being upstairs with Mrs M'Ivor, and the rest of the party at church, whither they had gone before Montgomerys arrived.

It was a glorious opportunity. What would not mother O'Neill have suggested and effected, had such a chance been offered her ! what did Hotspur do ?

He felt, to begin with, dreadfully hampered by the consciousness that he had an object to serve.

He beat about the bush for a long time, without making the least approach to it. Grace neither liked nor wanted

him and was at no pains to conceal either. At length, in despair, he blurted out :

‘Pon my word, Grace,—I know you can’t like me ;—but, you see, it was *not* my fault, that I and Pincher bothered you so, the other day ! Roger showed me up, you know !’

Grace’s eyes opened to their widest stretch, in the middle of this speech ; at its end she shortly replied :

‘Why did you come then ?’

‘Why !’ stammered the other. ‘Roger showed me up, and Pincher barked, and I—— why, of course I——.’

‘Need not have joined,’ retorted Grace.

‘Hump !’ thought he. ‘This is awkward ! what can I say next ?—and mother O’Neill—and the pony !—and I—— ; it is a pretty mess altogether. I wonder whether I could find the key, and do without her ? what a provoking, unmanageable girl she is ;—I am sure I don’t know where to look for it ;—mother O’Neill will think me such a fool !—I’ll try again. Well, to be sure, ‘he added aloud,’ I was very wrong ; and I’m sorry now ; but I was not so bad as that sneak of a brother of your’s !’

‘Roger is not a sneak,’ said Grace, surprised into defending him. ‘You drove the dog on, and me about, without Roger. I got out as Roger came in. Roger is no sneak. But I don’t choose to talk about this,’ and in good sooth, not another word on the subject would she utter.

Thus completely foiled, Hotspur was not sorry to hear his mother’s steps descending the stairs, and her summons to him to return home. With nothing accomplished, the way rather blocked than opened, Hotspur pondered anxiously over his failure. His mother had so far gained her point, that she felt sure that her son would be asked to the party, in which case, he had better not refuse. He replied readily, that he intended to go for the week, and take his

welcome for granted. His mother demurred a little at first, but agreed at length, only hoping that they would ask him for the nights as well, which, he said, he could easily manage. So he had gained one step. But that tiresome Grace and the key, these seemed beyond him. All the rest of the evening did he ponder, and ponder, without coming to any conclusion. He knew not where the key was, and he was sure mother O'Neill did not, or she would not trust to Grace; he could not get at any information from the servants; Bob Dacres he would not trust, even if he knew that Bob could help; and to hang about Walpole Hall, as he had told his mother he would, was a boast rather than a hope. He had only encountered Grace, and she had been barely civil to him. He could not possibly tell, he could only guess, and that guess was not agreeable, how far Roger and Tom, and the Colonel himself, would welcome him!

Therefore the evening closed, and nothing was decided upon by him. Nor did Monday morning bring brighter thoughts. He rose with a painful sense of perplexity and failure, all the more humbling because he was sure that mother O'Neill would not forgive him for it. He dared not anger her; he believed the pony might any day make its appearance in his father's stable, obliging him to explain how it came there. But he wished himself quit of the whole scheme! even Grace had scorned him; his mother, he knew, had been thoroughly annoyed by his disgrace at the Hall. She had hitherto visited her wrath only on the Walpoles, but he did not feel safe, if this fresh escapade was discovered, especially since her dislike to his riding was so strong. Hotspur was in a complete quandary! and he sat down to reconsider his position, with all the wits he possessed.

Suddenly he remembered that Colonel Walpole had

taken a boy from Sir William's stables to be under groom at the Hall. Hotspur had known this boy ! possibly he might get at him with some story that might persuade the boy to find him the key ; then came another difficulty, how could he bribe him ; all his money was appropriated. He could not ask his parents for more without being questioned about that. He thought of his mother's maid,—but a vision of the miserable parrot, dying by his means, flashed across his mind, and made him hastily reject the idea of applying to her for help in his difficulty. To many of the men he was already in debt, and they would probably refuse his request point blank, if he asked for more loans ; neither would his intended victim risk his place for promises, however lavish Hotspur might be of them. So at last he determined to carry his money in his pocket, and, if need be, take some of that ; he might have a battle to fight about it afterwards with the old woman, but he fancied that she would never give the scheme up for ten shillings or so, however much she might bluster at first.

Satisfied by this resolution, or, rather, perhaps, more at ease than he had been, Hotspur dressed himself, and descended to the breakfast-room. There, in reply to his parents' inquiries, he announced that he was going to meet the ' Hall boys' at the big pond, for sliding, and that he was to lunch with them, and should probably not return until dark—supposing that he was not asked to stay altogether for the week, which he expected to be. Having thus arranged for a day's freedom—whether by truth or falsehood, mattered little to him—Master Hotspur gathered up his cash into his purse, having carefully separated ten shillings in silver from the gold, and deposited the whole in his pocket. Then he put on his great coat and gaiters, and started on his expedition. He intended to take the road

to the stables behind Walpole Hall ; but, just as he was turning into it, he caught sight of the ubiquitous mother's red cloak, and started back into the main road that led to the Hall lodge. By no manner of means did he want to be seen until he had something reassuring to impart.

So he walked rapidly on, fearing every moment lest she should come striding after him, or unexpectedly appear out of some gap, or behind some tree, or over some hedge, where he could have no reason to expect to see her. He began to feel quite haunted by her ; and this feeling did not assist him in arranging his very uncertain plans. What he was to say to this William Luxton, he had no idea ; whether to go straight at him (speaking figuratively), and ask for the key, or whether he had better approach him by zigzags, as it were, and wheedle the required knowledge out of the unconscious William. If he only could ! —but he felt very helpless.

And fortune altogether refused to favour him. He was neither bold enough, nor good enough to secure her aid. William Luxton, he learnt at the lodge, was riding out on an errand. He had himself the pleasure of seeing his back, and his horse's tail, just disappearing round a distant corner in the road. But where he was gone, or when he would return, the lodge-keeper could not tell him, nor even if he would return that way ; but she thought he might, and that probably he would not be long, as the people at the Hall were 'mighty busy, 'specting company,' and it was not likely that William could be spared for long.

So the luckless Hotspur waited, just inside the drive, behind the hedges, or under the trees, walking up and walking down, dawdling and watching, until he began to think it must be approaching twelve o'clock. The woman at the

lodge had come to him once or twice, to beg him to walk in and rest in her house, but he felt too guilty ; at last, she asked him plainly, why he did not go up to the Hall, and leave a message, or wait there for the lad's return. Hotspur muttered some reply ; but learning from her that William might have returned by another road, and might be even then in the stables, Hotspur said that he would go on and see.

It really was time that he should, for he was wretchedly cold. But he did not choose to go straight to the stables, and run the risk of speaking to William in company. He determined to join the boys, whose voices he now heard, shouting with merriment, and who, he knew, were sliding on the pond. A short walk brought him within sight of an animated scene.

Numerous boys, in every sort of warm garment, were skating or sliding on a pond of beautiful ice. They were of different ages, from Billy M'Ivor of eight, one of the jolliest of all, past Roger and Tom, both not far off twelve, to John Howard, somewhere under sixteen, and a strapping big fellow for his age. There they were, the skaters trying to cut figures of every possible form, the sliders slipping hither and thither, sometimes sailing along in triumph, and anon laid prone on their backs, perhaps two or three in a heap, to the delight, and amid the laughter of their companions, who, in general, soon afforded ample cause for like merriment in return.

No ladies were present ; but they had been. They had been sliding in chairs, *selon la règle*, for a good hour, earlier in the morning, with no misadventures, excepting one. But one chair had caused a sad disaster ; it had overturned Grace, temper and all. And then the eager sliders, who shot to her rescue, had fallen pell-mell over her, rolling

and slipping her along in a very uncomfortable fashion. And amid peals of laughter (that hurt her still more), she regained her feet, to find herself full a hundred slippery paces off safe ground.

The temper in which she reached it may be imagined. But as even Amy, who saw that her foolish cousin was appropriating all the fun for ridicule, could not check her amusement, there was no blame attributable anywhere.

Yet Roger had unfortunately been both the unskilful pusher, the loudest laughter, and her clumsy assistant to the bank. 'HE never spares or helps me!' thought his sister.

She betook herself straight in-doors, whither Amy and the other girls soon followed. Isabel had not been out.

'Oh, I say!' was the first exclamation Hotspur heard, as he slowly approached the pond, 'it's just twelve; and I am to carry father's purse to the long meadow by half-past, or a quarter to one. What a bother to give up all this fun.'

'But you won't be long, Roger,' replied another voice — 'just there and back; it is only at the end of the shrubby walk, and a bit along the road.'

'Oh, I dare say, a bit! it's a good half-hour's walk.'

'Can't you run?' inquired somebody else.

'Run or walk, it's a great bore. I wish the governor had carried his purse. I say, Tom, don't you think the girls might go?'

'I'm sure Amy would, if nurse is going. My mother would not like her to go alone. But it will take us as long to go and see, as to run to the long meadow. Suppose you and I start, Roger. Have you got the purse?'

'No,' replied Roger; 'I must go in after it; and if the girls would go, that would do.'

'Can I carry any message' inquired Hotspur, joining the speakers.

'Hey! Ha! Hotspur!' and the tone was not cordial, but the temptation to make use of him was too great. 'Well; yes, if you would; just tell Amy—the long meadow gate—directly—Isabel has the purse.'

'And then come back and slide,' shouted Tom, in an impulse of hospitality, 'we've lots of grub.'

'Very well,' returned Hotspur, willingly enough, as he ran off to carry the message.

'I thought he was not coming, you said,' observed the big Howard.

'No, he was not to be asked,' was the answer.

'Then what do you mean to do, if you send him on your errands?' inquired John.

'Oh, we don't know, and don't care!' exclaimed the boys, dashing off down a slide. And Howard followed them on his skates; it was nothing to him what they did; so the fun went merrily on.

Hotspur, in the meantime, reached the house, and, pausing at the school-room window, he peeped in to see if either of the girls were there. He preferred giving his message thus, to obtaining a regular admittance by the front door. Grace was the only person in the room, brooding over her trouble by the fire. She turned round as he tapped stealthily at the window, and seeing that he wished to speak, she came slowly forward and opened it.

'Grace, are you going out walking?' inquired he.

'No,' said she shortly.

'Is any one else?'

'I believe nurse and the little ones are,' she muttered.

'Would they carry a message, do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'Your father's purse,' continued Hotspur pushing on, 'must be carried to the gate of the long meadow by a quarter-past one, to meet him. Roger can't do it. It's in the house. Can't you find some one?'

'No,' said Grace.

'Well, you can try; Roger will leave it with you, and you must try,' said he, with an eye to the boys' goodwill.

'Shan't,' exclaimed Grace, turning quickly round.

'Then you will have to explain it to the Major! He must have his purse; and Roger has told you now. You have only to catch nurse! you have no excuse, you know, so—good bye;' and Hotspur ran off, quite certain that she must see the purse safely delivered.

Grace!—poor Grace! it would have been aggravating to a more good tempered girl. She wouldn't go—that she wouldn't. Roger might get scolded. But then he would not. She would catch it. What a shame.

And she fumed and dawdled; until, on seeking nurse, she found her gone.

In the meantime Hotspur returned to the pond. Roger and Billy were standing on its bank, pausing in their game to watch a race that was rapidly approaching them, of four or five boys, Tom amongst them. Hotspur brought the joyful news, that the message was in safe hands, so that Roger need trouble himself no more about it. He delivered this news to the two boys just as the race came sweeping in.

'Hurrah!' shouted Roger, 'really you're a jolly good fellow, Hotspur. Come along and have a good slide.'

'Or, stay,' said Tom, 'shall we have something to eat first? I say, that was a good run!'

'No,' replied Roger, 'let's slide on for a bit first, it wants nearly an hour to one yet. Come, Hotspur.'

Skating was one of the few accomplishments that Hotspur could perform well. He borrowed a pair of skates, and leaving the banks, dashed into the midst of the party, with real spirit and enjoyment. To most present his success caused no surprise; but Roger looked on with undisguised admiration, and his dislike to Hotspur lessened, as he observed that the boy could challenge even big Howard, without fear of a defeat, and cut a quadrille, etc., as well as or better than any one else there (old scores had, in Roger's opinion, been blotted out by that jolly good licking!) An hour was spent with much delight, and when it had passed, and the boys repaired to the boat-house to eat their grub, one delight was only exchanged for another. The boat was filled with them, cheering and shouting, and hurrying Tom and Roger, who had taken possession of the basket, and were busily unpacking its contents. Hotspur took charge of the basket of drinkables, and established himself on intimate terms with these two boy-hosts, who bore with him for various reasons but who indeed were too happy to be cross against any one.

What the basket contained it would be difficult to describe! roll after roll of cloths were unwrapped, displaying now a 'jolly lump of beef,' now 'a chicken, all cut up too, ready to be eaten! so nice!' now ham, bread, salt, cheese, a 'cake, a plum cake, oh / OH!' and at last a baked plum-pudding, with the 'plums all whispering together!' Then in the other basket, beer, and ginger beer, and gooseberry wine. There never was such a provider as Mrs Walpole in this world.

'But what's this?' inquired a little boy, holding up a smaller roll, which no one else had observed. 'What's this, I wonder? and here's another! why Walpole, you don't half unpack——.'

'I thought I had turned everything out,' responded Tom, 'let me see. Orange marmalade, as I'm alive; and this is gooseberry jam; so it is, now boys, what shall we have first?'

'The meat; the meat first, of course, hand away.'

Thomas and Roger obeyed, and assisted by the officious Hotspur, soon succeeded in satisfying the impatience of their companions. The boys were seated around and within the boat, and just balanced here, or swinging there, backwards and forwards, or seated soberly and comfortably inside, they commenced eating, and continued their task until the baskets were empty, and the boys strength restored (supposing it ever diminished!) to return to their amusement on the pond.

'Here now Roger! what a hurry you are in. The ice won't run away. Now don't leave me to pack all these things alone.'

'What's the matter? why, there's nothing left.'

'We have not eaten the tumblers and cloths, you see, I must put them away.'

'Let James do it; the men, or somebody.'

'Anybody but you, I suppose,' grumbled Tom.

'I'll help,' cried Hotspur. 'Go and slide Roger; I'll help Tom.'

'Upon my word you are a good-tempered fellow, Hotspur,' replied Roger. 'I did not know you till to-day.'

'Disagreeable fellow,' thought Tom. 'What's he after now?'

Roger did not tarry to hear Hotspur's reply, who indeed made none. Bad as he was, he was not so bad as to dissemble entirely his consciousness that he was plotting to terrify Roger. His thoughts also, just then, were engaged in persuading Tom to get him an invitation to sleep at the

Hall, and he succeeded so far on Tom's good nature, that the latter promised to speak to his mother on the subject. It was rather a relief this to Tom, because his suspicions had been roused by Hotspur's unwonted good temper, and he felt half alarmed at what he might be wanting. By this time everything was packed, and the two boys free.

'Come, we'll go and slide again,' said Tom.

'Yes,' replied Hotspur, doubtfully. 'When do you think I may come, Tom? I don't want to bother you, but how am I to know?'

'My mother will write to your mother, I suppose.'

'And soon?' inquired his companion.

'I can't tell,' cried Tom; 'but soon, of course, or the week will be over. Come along; come!'

'I can't; I was thinking,' said Hotspur, 'I've an engagement at half-past two or three; I have to meet Bob Dacres up at his cottage, about those dogs.'

'No manner of good,' said Tom. 'Bob is over the moors, after the rats at Sincote Abbey.'

'I must go though,' replied Hotspur, rising and stretching himself to conceal his awkwardness.

'What's the good? I tell you Bob is not there. I heard the men say so then, this morning; and he is coming here in a few days, you can see him then.'

'The men may be wrong; or his wife may be at home. No, I must go,' replied Hotspur.

'Well, if you must, you must,' said Tom. 'I shall go and slide.'

And Tom ran off; but on looking back, he was caught by a sly puzzled look on Hotspur's countenance, which roused his suspicion again. He checked his run into a walk, and glanced back even then two or three times to see what his late companion was about. Hotspur con-

tinued standing at the boat-house door, apparently watching Tom out of sight. At last he struck into a pathway, and was just disappearing, when he was arrested by Tom's voice.

'Hallo ! I say, Hotspur ! that won't lead you to Bob's ; it's right the other way.'

'Thank you,' shouted Hotspur back. 'I thought it would.'

'No ; that's the right road to Bob's.'

And that Hotspur took, but it was not his road at all, and he soon left it to regain the path to mother O'Neill's. It happened that after about ten minutes' walking, both roads became visible again from the pond ; and as Tom continued sliding, his thoughts became more and more puzzled about Hotspur ; and he unconsciously watched the road to Bob's at the place where it became visible to him ; with no exactly fixed idea, however, of watching Hotspur, but rather to satisfy his own uneasiness.

Now, Hotspur wore a peculiarly bright red comforter, and, as he walked along, this caught the eye of one of the skaters, who, to Tom's amazement, exclaimed, looking at the wrong road—

'There goes Hotspur ! that must be his comforter ! Well, if I had red hot to my name, red in my hair, and red heat in my temper, I wouldn't have red in my comforter too, I know !'

Tom *was* puzzled ; but he felt his suspicions to be too vague, and too unreasonable perhaps, to be spoken of. He determined at first to confide them to his mother, when he should execute Hotspur's request. But this determination came to nothing ; for, on his return, he found that she had received a note from Lady Montgomery, with the information that she and Sir William were hurried from home by

the sudden death of some friend, and with the request that Mrs Walpole would house Hotspur during their absence. Tom's promise of helping him to an invitation only resulted in checking him from throwing any obstacle in his way, and he kept his bewilderment to himself. But he was none the less teased by it, and vexed that Hotspur was to be asked.

In the meantime Hotspur walked on, feeling much like a naughty school-boy going to be whipped ; and he would almost as soon have been whipped, as confess his repeated failures to mother O'Neill.

She was not visible outside her cottage, as he drew near it, and he cherished a faint hope that she might not be visible anywhere ; but the hope vanished as he knocked at the door, and received a gruff permission to enter.

He walked in, and found her sitting over the fire, which burnt brightly in the grate. She looked up as he entered, and hastily removing a bottle from the table to the cupboard, she turned upon him with a fierce stare.

'Well,' she said, 'done nothing.'

'I have brought the money,' stammered the boy.

'Give it me,' she said.

Hotspur handed her the purse, and stood by whilst she emptied its contents, and counted them.

'There's one shilling short,' she said.

'No,' replied he ; 'there cannot be.'

'There *is*,' she said.

'Indeed,' returned the boy. 'I brought it all here, mother ; look, you have left it in the purse !'

'Ha !' she exclaimed. 'It is not often that I leave things behind me.'

And Hotspur handed her the shilling. She then recounted the coins, and pocketed them.

'Well,' she began again, 'what next?'

'I have no more money,' faltered Hotspur.

'I know that,' she said impatiently. 'How about Grace and the key?'

'I—— I can't make anything of Grace!' cried Hotspur.

'You can't, can't you,' she said, in a tone of indescribable contempt. 'How do you mean to succeed then? This won't buy the pony,' slapping her hand on her pocket.

'I thought I might ask William Luxton,' continued Hotspur, in the same tone of helpless indecision.

'*Thought*! have you *done* it?'

'No. I could not see him.'

'When will you see him?' and her eyes were fiercely interrogating his countenance.

'I—don't—know—I thought——.'

'Thought!' exclaimed the mother again, bringing her hand down upon the table with a vehemence that startled him afresh. 'This is just it, Master Hotspur,' she continued, in a tone that completely scattered his remaining wits, 'I'll trust you to *do* nothing, and what you *think* I don't care. You'll be at Walpole Hall all this week; you'll *do* just what I bid you. And I'll trust you with nothing.'

'How do you know that I shall be there? I don't know it; but Tom said—.'

'Tom!' exclaimed the fierce woman. 'You will be at Walpole Hall, and you'll do just what I bid you. You'll go there this afternoon, and you'll meet me by the old tower, where we are to get in, at eight to-morrow night—and—you'll—*not*—fail! You will say naught to Grace. You only do harm, *you* do! now this is all I want of you, and you may go. You, won't fail; if you do!' and she raised herself to her full height, and fixed her keen eyes on him. Hotspur quailed beneath their gaze, and took im-

mediate advantage of her permission to depart, only too thankful to be off. He felt indeed, as strongly as she could desire, the power of her strong will over his. He was as sure as she could be, that, whatever happened, he must obey her bidding, let it be what it might.

He left her dwelling, and hurried home, to find that, as the reader already knows, his visit at Walpole Hall had been arranged for, and to wonder at Mrs O'Neill's unfailing knowledge. He was really too much cowed by her to fret at present under his entire subjugation to her will.





CHAPTER XIII.

ISABEL'S IMPROMPTU VISIT.

‘By this arrived there
Dame Una, weary dame, and entrance gan requere.

Fairy Queen.



OTHER O'NEILL reseated herself as the object of her scorn and irritation disappeared, and in so doing she caught sight of a green morocco silver-mounted purse, that must have fallen from her lap as she rose. She hastily pocketed it, and turned round to see if the boy could have perceived it, which he might well have done, for it lay full in view.

But on this point she could not satisfy herself, for he was gone. She turned moodily to the fire, and sat gazing into it, her hands fiercely clenched, one in her lap, one resting on the table; whilst the expression on her features changed gradually from the wrathful contempt she had bestowed upon Hotspur to a wearied yearning look, one bespeaking much misery. She spoke at length—

‘Oh, Jem, Jem! to think of thy mother herself coming to this! Gin——. I have bought it; the first since you all left; and this purse,—’tis theft. Not the gathering of the food, which they call theft; but this is what I’d call

theft, and I ought to know. But it makes me safe ; and if I get my own, they shall have this—if I succeed. And if I don't, now I can go without. They'll be glad to get rid of me, and it would cost them this much to send me off—so !—But oh, Jem, Jem, I would have come to thee with clean hands !'

And she began restlessly to pick the stray sticks and straws out of the fire, and throw them on the top. Soon she began muttering again—

'Tis but two days more. I could not stand much more of it. On Wednesday night I'll try ; on Thursday she shall have the purse, after I'm off;—yes—yes, after I'm off. And shall he have his ? Not if I'm short. He deserves nothing ; he is as tricky as he's blundering, the stupid boy ! he deserves nothing from me. He has lost us Grace and that key, but he must manage it while he is at the Hall. And she can't tell on us now, the provoking girl.'

She sat still a few seconds longer, and then slowly and fearfully she drew forth the green purse from her pocket, and began to count its contents. L.6 of Hotspur's money was in one division, three sovereigns and some half sovereigns and silver in another, and a L.5 Bank of England note in a third—little short of L.17 in all.

Whilst thus engaged, with the money in her hands and lap, she was wonderfully startled by a knock at the door. She thrust it all rapidly back, and pocketing the closed purse, she turned to face her visitor, who was softly opening the door. It was none other than Isabel M'Ivor.

Now, to explain her appearance there, we must go back to the time when Grace drew upon herself the worst consequences of 'those boys' abominable conduct' by dawdling till she missed Mrs Thirswell.

Neither could she find Isabel nor Amy. But the purse

lay on the former's dressing-table—her father's room ; and the time was rapidly approaching when it must be delivered. So Grace dressed to carry it herself.

BOTHER ! ten times over bother ! But she dared not be late.

She sulkily proceeded on her way. And she encountered the mother again suddenly in that everlasting shrubby walk. Of course she was bound to avoid her : but whatever she might, under other circumstances have done, in her present mood, a command was the best security for disobedience. There were times when she could neither be dragged nor driven.

So up she walked to the old woman, and pulled her cloak.

'Ho !' said mother O'Neill, after a momentary glance, and in great displeasure, 'kissed and made friends. Good children !' pointing to the purse, which Grace carried in her hand. This was no random hit ; she had heard that forenoon, whilst hidden under a hedge, that Roger was to bring it, and her disappointment was intense to find Grace carrying it.

'No,' almost roared Grace, 'No.'

'Then what are you running his errands for ?'

'He made me,' growled the girl.

'Oh, did he ! no difficult matter that I suppose ! I thought your's was a teacup storm, the other day ; and I supposed you'd changed, as you didn't come.'

'They wouldn't let me,' snapped Grace.

'Good child ! to be so obedient,' sneered the mother.

'I aint obedient—I won't be,' cried Grace.

'Won't be, h'm ! worth a deal that ! He won't get punished by you, that's very plain, and he deserves it, the sneak.'

'Sneak !' cried Grace, with a startled pause. 'Have you taught Hotspur that word ?'

'Blundering fool,' muttered the mother, 'this comes of trusting to him !'

'I can punish him well,' continued she, finding it convenient to disregard Grace's last remark. 'I can make him remember it well now.'

She hesitated, feeling her way, and uncertain whether or not Hotspur had succeeded, 'unless you're all good friends,' she sneered again.

Grace was looking unutterable things. Isabel's warning and influence were full in her mind : her temper was pulling her every way, and she was extremely disgusted with her companion. It was a very great sin to tell Grace's secrets ; she resented it exceedingly.

'You've told of me !' she grumbled.

'To no one that matters. How could I do it alone ? and Master Montgomery won't tell again, for his own sake.'

'I don't want Master Montgomery ! especially not him. You'd no business to tell. He's worse than Roger.'

'But I have. So it can't be helped. There's no harm done, I tell you ! and,' added the woman boldly, 'now you are to help us, for we've gone too far to go back, and we are doing your work. We have a right to your help. You said, in the tower, and so it shall be ; but we must have the key ! You must hang it there, on that nail, by the bush, by——.'

'I am sure I shan't,' said Grace.

'Eh ! shan't ? What's the good of you saying shan't ? Who thought of it first ? who bid me do it ? who never spoke with us all this time to stop it ? Shan't, indeed ! And now you are going to turn tail, are you ! why won't you do it, I should like to know ?'

Grace was in no mood to say : Because it will vex Isabel ! which probably had great weight with her. She

was utterly against being obedient either way, just then. So she held her tongue.

'Does the Colonel know what you have been about with me?' inquired the mother, after a short pause.

Grace's lips formed a startled No !

'No ! and what should hinder my telling him ? Here you leave me in the lurch ! and I've got his anger by speaking to you ; and he can harm me enough ; why shouldn't I make my peace, by telling of you. He'll be glad to have it stopped ; he won't like what you are doing. Eh ? so if that key is not there by to-morrow night, I'll go straight to him, that I——Hush ! we are watched !'

And the mother hastily withdrew into the bushes, dragging Grace with her. But she was arrested by one of the workmen's voices :—

'Hullo ! mother O'Neill. You here again ? you'll have to answer it to the Colonel some day for this trespassing. I'll be bound.'

'Then let him ask his own belongings why I am here !' cried the provoked mother. 'May be they'll tell him, without his hankering after me !'

'Aye—aye—you'd best go,' returned the man, as he passed on ; for he, like the rest of his kind, did not care overmuch to anger her.

But Grace had taken advantage of the interruption to wrench herself loose, and walk off, excessively annoyed and unhappy.

But as she approached the spot, where she was to meet her father—she remembered her purse—it was gone. It was not in her pocket, nor in her hands. It might be on the ground, where she had been talking, and Grace flew back to see. But in vain. It was gone.

And so was mother O'Neill. The reader need scarcely

be told, that the latter had observed it on the ground, had picked it up, and pocketed it. She was in no mood to spare Grace by restoring it; moreover, it might form a convenient hold over her, or secure her own departure if the tower scheme failed.

But poor Grace, her naughtiness turned into sudden terror, fled to her sister's room, the only shelter she could think of in her great distress. She cowered there by the bedside, trembling, for a long long time, it seemed to her, before Isabel came in. The latter hurried to her dressing-table, and turned the things on it rapidly over, evidently without finding what she wanted. She was leaving the room, when Grace cried out:—'Isabel!'

Isabel turned. 'Oh, Grace,' she exclaimed, 'do you know anything of papa's purse? Why, my dear Grace?' and she seated herself on the bed by Grace's side, 'what can be the matter with you?'

'I came to seek for you, Isabel; and you—were—not—here!'

'But what is the matter, my dear?' inquired Isabel, almost as much distressed as her sister.

'I carried papa's purse. Roger and Hotspur made me. And I've lost it! It was full of money.'

'Lost it!—Grace, O!—But where did you lose it? perhaps we can find it—only tell me where?'

'But I can't tell exactly;—and I know you'll not find it, because I have been looking hard.'

'My poor Grace! But tell me where you were, and I will tell them downstairs, that they may go and look. Grace dear, where was it?'

'Outside—out of doors—on the way!'

'I will go and tell papa,' said Isabel resolutely.

'Dare you?' exclaimed Grace. And to speak the

truth, Isabel's face looked as if it did require some resolution ; but she left the room without reply.

After a short time she returned looking very pale.

'Grace,' she said, 'I am come to ask you all about it. And you must tell me, or you must tell papa : but I thought I would ask first' (Grace's face grew dark). 'Did you go by the shrubbery walk?'

'Yes,' she sullenly replied.

'Because I understand,' continued her sister piteously, 'that you left the house about half-past twelve, and have only just returned. Have you been dawdling, Grace? or did you meet anyone there?'

The last question was asked in a low agitated tone.

The truth was that mother O'Neill's interview had been, as we know, observed by one of the men, not one of whom could bear her about the place, who had reported the same to Colonel Walpole, and thereby sent him to his luncheon in a state of extreme annoyance. Then the delay in the arrival of the purse, having disturbed all their shooting arrangements, had quite as much disturbed their tempers. And now Isabel was so long in returning, that they had to get other money, and start without waiting. It was no wonder that the Major vented his indignation upon his son, as soon as he saw him ; or that he sent him indoors for the rest of the day.

But to return : the first part of this information had somehow reached Isabel before she re-entered the dining-room, and sent her back to extract the truth from her sister. And it was with the most painful alarm that she now discovered, with the greatest difficulty, partly by guessing, partly by dragging each fact out of Grace, that not only had the child dropped the purse, whilst, or just after talking to mother O'Neill, who probably had it ; but

that some secret existed between them, which was, Isabel could see, making Grace extremely unhappy, though she would not reveal it.

Isabel therefore determined to seek the woman herself, and extract the truth from her, if she could. She was strengthened in this resolve, by finding that her father, uncle and aunt, had all left the house for the afternoon, when she finally returned to detail her unsatisfactory search for the purse ; and that she had therefore some time before her, until their return.

Convinced that every other duty must give way to this, she hastily excused herself from her mother's room, and set out alone for her expedition—dreading it, oh ! so much, and perhaps by this very dread, the more impelled to go.

Grace knew of her purpose ; but Grace's miserable perversity was upon her in full force ; aggravated by the keenest displeasure at her sister's cross-examination, and by her own exceeding alarm at the uncomfortable aspect of affairs. She never could bear to be questioned ! invariably she held her tongue steadily during the process. Now she did heartily fear to repeat mother O'Neill's demand and threat. And in addition, she was fiercely conscious how much her sister, indeed, every one else, would blame her conduct. So she let Isabel depart without one word of explanation, or comfort, or gratitude.

Isabel reached mother O'Neill's by about three o'clock in the afternoon. And mother O'Neill was as much astonished at her presence as Isabel was to find herself there.

Come about the purse !' was mother O'Neill's involuntary thought, as she recognised her visitor. 'Has Grace told of the tower, it is all up with us if she has.' But she replied aloud to Isabel's inquiry, 'Yes, come in : what hinders you ?'

Isabel entered ; the whole aspect of the house, and the appearance of its inmate, were to the full as forbidding as she had pictured to herself. And she felt at a loss how to begin her errand.

Mother O'Neill sat facing her, bolt upright on her chair ; but she made not the smallest effort to begin any conversation. She looked inquiry and defiance.

Isabel paused for a moment, and then began in her usual tone and manner :

'I am sorry to intrude upon you, Mrs O'Neill,' she said, 'But my father's purse has been dropped by my sister in the shrubbery walk, and I am very anxious, for her sake, to recover it without delay. You were with my sister, the men say, about the time? Did you see the purse? Can you tell me anything about it?'

So she got to the end of her awkward inquiry, and paused for a reply.

'So you are one of the brood? you're a fairer one than most of them,' was the answer she received!

'One of the brood?' repeated Isabel, 'I am Colonel Walpole's eldest niece, if that is what you mean, and my name is M'Ivor, sister to Grace, whom you know.'

'Aye! I do know her, and she knows me.'

'Would you be as good as to answer my question about the purse? I am very anxious about it, for my sister's sake.'

'Did the Colonel send you, then—or the Major—or Grace?'

'None of them. I came of my own accord. No one but Grace knows that I am come.'

'And you want to know if I have *stolen* the purse; that's what you mean.'

'I did not say so, Mrs O'Neill; but you may have picked it up, and be glad to return it.'

‘And you don’t think that I could; without your coming after it! I’m no fool, Miss M’Ivor.’

Isabel had by this time closed the door. She was standing by the table, when the woman made this speech, and turned angrily from her towards the fire. There was no use in denying that a suspicion of theft had been full in Isabel’s mind, ever since she had heard of the loss, as the only natural conclusion she could arrive at; and it was only until she came to put it into words, that she had adopted, willingly enough, the more charitable conclusion, which she had expressed. Still reluctant to put her suspicion into words, she was at a loss what reply to make.

Mother O’Neill seemed determined not to speak again. She reached out her hand for the bottle, which she had displaced at Hotspur’s entrance, and took a good draught of its contents. She then boldly planted the bottle on the table by her side. The pause had given Isabel time to gather her thoughts.

‘I am sorry that there should be any truth in your idea that I was suspecting you of theft; but I can only judge by what I hear! You must be aware that suspicion and inquiry will point at you; when you and my sister were alone in the shrubbery walk, where the purse was dropped, and whither Grace returned directly to seek for it, though in vain. Neither my uncle nor my father have heard the whole story as yet, because they had left the house before Grace had told it to me; but I shall certainly tell them as soon as they come in. And you must know that they will make the same inquiry of you, that I am making. I am sorry to press you, but, perhaps, for your own sake, it would be as well to answer my question.’

Mother O’Neill felt that Isabel was no fool, the Colonel and the Major were certain enough to question her, and in

no such courteous mood as Isabel was adopting. A search warrant, a policeman, a public inquiry, probably imprisonment on suspicion, would not be alluring to her at any time. Just now, though this Isabel apparently did not know, they would be her destruction. In her dilemma she stretched out her hand for the bottle again, but Isabel stopped her with a gentle : 'Not *that*; mother O'Neill.'

The woman stared angrily at her ; but she obeyed. Isabel then continued :

~ 'Will you not answer my question?'

But the mother jerked herself sulkily round on her chair, and faced the fire ; expressing thus a rather emphatic No.

Poor Isabel therefore attempted her second inquiry.

'You have entangled my sister in some secret—my uncle and father cannot allow this. Will you tell me what it is about, Mrs O'Neill?'

She was not a good ambassadress for such an opponent, in thus openly confessing her ignorance !

Mother O'Neill grew desperate. 'No,' she burst forth with a violent oath. 'Why do you come intermeddling in this manner, Miss M'Ivor? It shall be worse for you, and for Grace, and for the whole pack of you, if you do !'

'It is not intermeddling for my own sister, Mrs O'Neill, replied Isabel, in the same firm, gentle tone. 'Surely it is my part to defend her ; and surely it is very, very wrong of you to involve so young a girl in your schemes. You must tell me the secret, Mrs O'Neill.'

'You're a bold young lady, you are !' exclaimed the mother, 'to come teasing me like this. But you'll get nothing out of me. You can ask your sister. Its her secret, not mine. Unless you get me before the magistrates ! If you drag me there, I'll tell fast enough. And its a pretty

tale to tell ! she's a hard temper, and a hot will, and is no ways particular what she's after when she's roused. 'Twont be forgotten, if she's lives till she is a hundred !' cried the woman, in a voice that grew hoarser and hoarser, for she felt the ground slipping from under her, and that she must silence Isabel at all hazards. 'You come to me for naught here ; but you drag me before Colonel Walpole, and the rest of them, and you may come then, and hear, 'if ye like !'

'And ye say that I've stolen that purse ! supposing, I say, that she let me pick it up—how could you prove me a liar !—But I don't say that I've got it.'

'There can be little doubt,' said Isabel sadly, 'or you would certainly say that you have not !'

'Supposing I did—you wouldn't believe me. No, so go and set your justices after me—you have the power ; but I've the power to ruin your sister—and I will, that I will—she knows it as well as I do !'

'Isabel turned deadly pale ; but she steadily replied,

'Threatening is of no use, Mrs O'Neill. I must tell my uncle about the purse, if you will not give it me. About Grace,' and her voice faltered, 'I trust she may tell me the truth herself—.'

'I will—you may trust me for that,' exclaimed the woman. 'By-and-bye.'

'Tell it me *now*?' said Isabel, and something in her tone, its distress, and yet its kindness, made even the mother waver. Moreover, the thought struck her, that Isabel might perhaps get her leave to ransack the old tower openly ; but no, no ; the old crime was too dreadfully real, to allow of such a hope for a moment.

She turned upon Isabel, therefore, to whom her hesitation gave a ray of life, and who had anxiously approached

her, with a ferocity and violence that made the girl recoil in dismay, and exclaimed :

‘Never ! Miss M’Ivor, you tell of me, and get me into a scrape, and I’ll tell of your sister what will never be forgotten if she lives till she is a hundred.’

But she seemed checked by her own fury, or by the girl’s distress, who had sought the window-sill for support, and stood trembling there with agitation.

‘Come, Miss M’Ivor,’ began the mother at last, laying her hand on Isabel’s arm. ‘Come, let us let each other alone,—for a while at least.’

But Isabel shook her off, and steadied her voice to reply. ‘I must tell my father and uncle, Mrs O’Neill, and leave the rest to Providence. Is it perfectly useless to add ; and to your own sense of right doing ? Can it have died out in you ? surely not.’

‘It’s war to the knife between you and me,’ muttered the woman, shrinking from her gaze.

‘Then I must leave you,’ said Isabel, turning to the door.

Mother O’Neill watched her reluctantly. This girl exercised a strange power over her ; she felt almost as if she could do right with her. She followed her outside.

‘Miss M’Ivor, do let us alone,’ she said, ‘it cannot be for long.’

‘If you will give me the purse, and tell me the secret,’ replied Isabel.

The mother turned back, and the fierce bang of her door was the only answer. But it was expressive.

Isabel went on her way ; grieved for the woman, and almost despairing for her sister. It was getting dark, quite time for her to make her best speed home.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE SEARCH-WARRANT.

‘What’s the matter?’

I can’t tell you : the provocation’s too great for words.’

Cibber’s ‘Refusal.’



HE evening was indeed closing in rapidly, and many of the actors in our story were congregating in or around the Hall. Isabel heard the sportsmen firing off their guns for the night, as she entered the shrubbery walk. They were approaching the house. A dogcart, too, was passing rapidly along the road beside her ; and it approached the Hall. It bore Hotspur Montgomery’s box, and it stopped to deposit its load, just as Isabel met her father, uncle, and their guests at a side entrance.

Hotspur came in quest of his belongings ; he did not join her, nor was he observed ; but he saw that his box was left, and then the servant departed.

Isabel at once joined her father.

‘Well,’ said he, ‘Where’s the purse?’

‘I fear ;—lost, papa,’ she replied mournfully.

‘Lost,’ echoed he, ‘you can’t mean really lost? how came this about?’ he demanded, as he read the truth in her face. Isabel!’ he added aside, ‘it was full of money—.’

'Grace attempted to carry it for Rogers,' she replied ; 'but she must surely have dropped it, for it cannot be found.' Isabel could not hint then at an intentional loss.

'And it had a large sum of money in it ! fool that I was not to take the note out this morning—and I have not the number either. Walpole ! these girls have lost my purse amongst them ; confound their carelessness !' cried the poor Major.

'How ?' inquired the Colonel.

'I left it in Isabel's care ; Roger was to carry it ; he chose to send Grace, and she's lost it !' and the Major began to stride towards the house in his dismay and vexation.

'Has not Grace been talking to mother O'Neill ?' inquired Colonel Walpole, coldly. 'I suppose *she* has it.'

'I fear she has,' said Isabel, 'I have been trying to get it from her.'

'What insanity !' shouted the Major. 'Why didn't you send after us the moment you had any suspicion ? you have lost the chance by all this dawdling ! no doubt you have.'

'Did you say that *you* had been to her house ?' inquired her uncle, sternly, 'so far—alone—and there.'

'Yes, uncle ;' the girl timidly replied.

'What in the world could have induced you to do so ? why did you not tell your aunt, or send to me ?'

'You were all out of reach,' replied Isabel, 'I did not know where or how to find you—but indeed I never thought of it once !' which was all perfectly true. But it was equally true, that another motive, that of sheltering Grace from the woman's machinations, had prompted her to go herself, and the sudden consciousness of this, gave unwonted hesitation to her voice.

'It's of no use dawdling now,' cried the Major. 'Send

for a policeman, Walpole ; and give me a search-warrant, directly.'

'Yes, indeed,' replied the latter, as he walked gravely into the house.

Hotspur had overheard this conversation.

'Oh ! I say,' thought he to himself, 'she'll be caught. I must bolt and warn her at once.'

And away he ran.

'Mother,' whispered he breathlessly, as he opened her cottage door. 'The Beaks—mind—the purse—directly, I saw it !'

'Has she told ?' was the hoarse reply.

'Aye—be off—while you may.'

'We meet to-morrow at eight.'

'Where ?'

'By the Hall,' replied mother O'Neill, as she wrapped herself in her red cloak, and gathering a few necessaries, prepared to depart.

Hotspur ran back to the Hall.

In the meantime Isabel had been following her uncle and father into the house, when a voice close by whispered : 'Where is Miss Grace, ma'am ?'

'Miss Grace !—why nurse ? where is she ?'

'I don't know, ma'am. She has been quarrelling again with Master Roger, and she's gone. They tell me that she passed down the shrubbery walk an hour ago. My mind misgave me about that old vagabond, ma'am.'

'Oh, nurse,' cried Isabel, unable longer to check her tears. 'I will go back and try to find her.'

'It is too late for you, ma'am ; let me go, Miss Isabel ! I can get my things in a minute.'

But Isabel was already out of sight in the darkness. She dared not trust Grace in any hands but her own.

Wearily but rapidly she retraced her steps ; and by the gate into the road, a good mile from the house she met Grace returning.

‘Grace, where have you been? Oh! how wrong you are to act like this.’

Grace had really only been watching for Isabel, to learn some news of the purse ; but the tone in which she blurted forth this fact, brought no conviction to Isabel, all bewildered and trembling as she was in the maze of wickedness in which she seemed entangled.

And indeed the poor foolish Grace had made a most serious downward step since Isabel had left home, to shelter and defend her.

Hotspur had got the key : and this was how !

He had returned with his mother’s note some time before his boy came. And finding that Roger was a prisoner, he had seated himself with him over the school-room fire.

‘Purse lost? or delayed—or what?’ asked he, ‘that you are here.’

‘Delayed. It was never taken. Who did you send, I should like to know?’

‘Why, Grace. She was sure to take it, I thought.’

‘Grace! and she was out! she was talking to mother O’Neill.’

‘I say!’ cried Hotspur, for the vision of the green purse flashed across his mind.

‘You say, what? I declare I’ll ask Grace herself.’

‘No, no,’ cried Hotspur, ‘It can’t be she. She was to send it by the nurse ; not take it herself.’

For he was mortally afraid lest an arrest of the mother might blow up all their plans, and bring the pony headlong upon himself.

‘I don’t care ; I’ll see for her!’ returned Roger.

And he did. He sought his sister. And more in earnest than he had ever been in his life, to scold her—he did so ; far beyond any justification that her carelessness might afford.

Hotspur took care not to meddle in their row. But after it had passed and Roger was gone, he spoke to Grace in a soothing tone, thus :—

‘Grace, this must be stopped. You can trust me and mother O’Neill? quick ! and get me the key.’

And Grace, too weary and indignant to consider, obeyed him.

In huge delight Hotspur secured it ; whilst Grace, no longer able to shelter herself in her sister’s room—she felt too naughty to remain there—sought refuge in the cold evening air, and the chance of meeting Isabel. She had little hope of hearing good news, but anything was better than sitting still.

Somehow she had missed her sister, and was met by the latter returning.

‘Grace !’ repeated her sister, ‘how very wrong you are to act thus ; where can you have been?’

Wrong ! why wrong ? wrong enough in other ways ; but not wrong here ! was Isabel going to be unjust too !

‘Where have you been ?’ asked her sister, for a miserable fear had dawned in her mind. But Grace vouchsafed no further reply, and Isabel felt too hopeless to persist in questioning.

‘Where can those girls have been?’ observed a guest from the Colonel’s room, as three quarters of an hour after the gentlemen’s return, he saw them, by the light of the back-windows, stealing in the back way ; all the front doors being by this time closed, ‘Where can they have been so late?’

The Colonel looked gloomily up. He was confounded at the daring disregard shown to his orders, and wishing his brother-in-law's family away with all his heart. But he *was* struck when he became aware that 'those girls' were Isabel and Grace. Isabel, who had been coming in, when he did, ever so long ago; and Grace, the persistently disobedient Grace.

He felt that something was extraordinarily wrong! But he said nothing. He hoped that mother O'Neill would soon be captured, and the riddle solved, or, at least, all further disobedience rendered impossible.

And the girls entered unquestioned.

'Grace—mother O'Neill said much that I must tell again!' said Isabel wearily.

So Grace vanished upstairs without a moment's delay. Whilst Isabel, poor thing, sought her aunt, who had just returned from her long drive; and compelling her to leave her guests and all other occupations, she drew her into a room, and half petrified Mrs Walpole by her distressing tale of the loss of the purse, and of her interview with mother O'Neill. Mrs Walpole was amazed, indignant, perplexed beyond all expression.

'But, Isabel, what can be done?' she exclaimed at length, when the full enormity of all Grace's possible iniquity had opened upon her.

'Tell my uncle all, aunt, I think. He does know of the purse, and I would have told him the rest, only we were so in public outside, and I was alarmed at Grace's escape. He and my father should know, I fear. I will tell, but—I thought perhaps you—!' and her voice quaked and quivered. 'I cannot save Grace, aunt Walpole!' she cried, 'I cannot think what it all means.'

'Nor I!—my poor Isabel. But what will William

think—William,' she exclaimed, as just then her husband entered the room, 'here has Isabel brought us a sad story.'

'Yes—,' said the Colonel, with great sternness.

'The purse is lost—that you know—.'

'Yes,' he assented in the same tone.

'And Isabel brings word that the mother almost accuses Grace of losing it on purpose, giving it, in fact, about some secret scheme of her own !'

The Fates and Furies, and all the ministers of vengeance, celestial or otherwise, would have rejoiced in the expression of the Colonel's face at that moment.

'Tell me all,' was all he trusted himself to say.

'Isabel !' cried her aunt.

So steadying herself and her voice, Isabel repeated the sickening tale : that the mother had rather refused to acknowledge than denied the possession of the purse ; and when taxed with a secret, had roughly asserted some scheme of Grace's, which she would betray, if arrested, about which she implied the purse had been given, and not lost ; which was of a nature not be forgotten, etc., etc.

The Colonel made her repeat it twice, standing before her with his candle in his hand : and the second time received the recital with a snort of ineffable scorn.

'Can you guess at any sense in it ?' inquired he.

'No, uncle, I do not think I can ; unless Grace is fiercely angry with some one ; and then I do not see what the mother can do, or have to do with it.'

'Of course not ! When young ladies will prefer their own fancies to obeying orders, it is very apt to produce these absurdities. The best thing that you can do, is to see that your sister keeps clear of that wicked woman, and to set her yourself an example—nay, Isabel, I do not speak in

unkindness,' he added, less sternly, 'but, my dear girl, I know nothing good can be got out of her.'

'I *do* not think you unkind, uncle.'

'Well, well, her father and I will speak to Grace, and insist on obedience—' Isabel looked quickly up—'Yes!' said her uncle, gravely, 'I cannot leave it to you my dear, the case is too serious for Grace herself—not for us.'

'You will tell no one else, uncle, for Grace's sake,' said Isabel, timidly, 'CERTAINLY not!' replied he.

And he fetched the father, told him, and together they had a talk with Grace, rather a talk at her, for there was no reciprocity in the conversation; and considering the person at whom it was uttered, no crumb of good ensued, rather the contrary!—but the gentlemen did what they considered right, and who could blame them! a child like Grace could expect nothing but downright orders from them. The effect was, however, to exasperate her against her sister, and deliver her up to her own obstinate ill-temper.

Isabel also withdrew from the interview with her uncle and aunt, feeling extinguished under his superior sense, ashamed of her expedition, and one among many guilty! Not much rewarded for her earnest desire to do right.

The Colonel and Major both desired silence on 'this absurd nonsense,' adding, that the 'old vagrant' would soon be caught, and all put a stop to.

But the old vagrant was more slippery than they anticipated. About eight that evening, the policeman sent to say, that her cottage was empty, and herself nowhere to be seen; but that he would watch it all night, and if this were not successful, raise the hue and cry in the morning!

* * * * *

The inmates of Walpole Hall sank to sleep on that Monday night, some in trouble, some in peace, some in wonder-

ing anticipations of what might happen on the morrow. Gradually the light disappeared from the windows, the sounds from the staircases and passages, the last words and sleepy good nights from the various couches in the several rooms, and silence and darkness settled over all. Hotspur had gone to sleep on the key with great satisfaction. Roger and Tom had settled with comfort into their tower chamber. They liked the novelty, and had fancied themselves soldiers off guard, awaiting their turn to be awakened. The guests were at rest, the nurses and their numerous charges 'all right,' even the old house-dog slumbered!

But one unhappy spirit was houseless on that night. Afraid to return to her cottage, after Hotspur's warning, she had concealed herself in a distant shed until the moon had risen sufficiently to give a little light. This was about two or three in the morning; she had then stolen near the tower, partly with a secret hope that she might, after all, find the key hanging on its nail, partly because the spot had a fascination for her.

The moon shone full on the front of the mansion as she paused to look around her, after a stealthy and fruitless search for the key. The night was brilliant; but a hard frost had set in, and it was bitterly cold. Mother O'Neill had no heart for the beauty of the scene before her; its tranquil purity could not touch her. She clenched her fist, and shook it, with a muttered curse, at the Hall and its sleepers, and then silently departed over the frozen snow, to seek a hiding-place from her pursuers.





CHAPTER XV.

SUSPICIONS MISDIRECTED.

'We figure to ourselves
The thing we like, and then we build it up,
As chance will have it.'

PHILIP VON ARTEVELLE, *by Henry Taylor.*



SABEL awoke in the morning, oppressed by a dull sense of something sad and painful, and the sense increased to anxiety as she lay on watching the daylight breaking on the house and over the old tower.

But the view of this latter conveyed no alarm to her mind. She carelessly, almost unconsciously, watched the sunbeams as they stole along, just brightening its outer corner, and throwing the inner angle into deeper shade, without imagining for a moment how nearly it was connected with the subject uppermost in her thoughts. Her alarm was reviving; it had been ruthlessly stunned last night by the blast of her uncle's scorn; now it revived to almost conviction, that its own view was the truest about Grace! *Some* secret existed: of this Grace's manner, and the mother's, both, and at different times, distinctly made her certain, and that time was needed for its development (which evinced its reality), was also clear, by the repeated prayer of the mother to be 'let alone.' But of what nature this secret could be, whom it could affect, or what effect Isabel perplexed herself in vain to discover. Grace had no grudge, but against Roger or Hotspur, or the

nurse ; but this respectable person's name, Isabel dismissed at once. Hotspur had injured her severely, and on the day that she was found with mother O'Neill, but Isabel could connect, no possible plot with his name, nor with Roger's, that it could be worth the woman's while to engage in : it could not be supposed she would work without a purpose.

Turning from this unsatisfactory survey, Isabel pondered on her chances of helping her sister, by sympathy or watching—and mournfully was she forced to account them nothing ! Grace was too angry by far to listen to her.

Another individual lay pondering on that bright winter's morning, and to assist his meditations he took out a key from under his pillow, and lay round on his face to examine it at leisure.

'A mighty deal of trouble you cost me, you did !' he soliloquized. 'But you are well worth having ;' and he lay on, and contemplated his key and his triumph over the mother, with exceeding glee, because, do you not see, *he* could get in and *she* could not ; and (at so safe a distance from her), he did triumph hugely over his advantage.

'Besides, I know of the purse,' thought he, 'but then ! I ought to tell, to make use of that—no—no ; she could tell back that I warned her ! Oh—no—no—I'll hold my tongue there. She'll say nothing, and she will try the tower for certain ; then she'll get away if she can ! But,' he continued thinking, 'but the pony is coming on Friday. I must help her in on Wednesday : it will be dreadful if it does come—oh, my !' exclaimed the boy, starting up at the bare idea. 'Now, suppose Grace tells—and Isabel, what does she know ! I know, I wish the old mother would eat the pony and herself too, that I do ! And suppose that any one finds out that I told—I think Grace saw me—I am sure I saw Grace—I wonder whether she went to tell the old mother that I had the key, or that the purse was

missed ; she'd be shut up if any one thought that—just what she ought to be, and Isabel too, for these two days—then Grace would get into such a temper, she'd be safe to say nothing ! and perhaps they wouldn't believe Isabel !' and thus concluding, Hotspur scrambled up to dress, securing his key, where no housemaid, scarcely a mouse, could find it.

He descended to the breakfast-parlour, where the whole family, guests and all, were assembled for prayers ; Isabel excepted, who was with her mother, and Grace, who was 'nowhere.' Afterwards the elders of the party were settling down to breakfast, and the younger ones dispersing for their skates, etc., when the butler announced that the policeman wished to speak to Colonel Walpole, who, with Major M'Ivor, immediately left the room, whilst Mrs Walpole remained, absently pouring out cups of steaming tea, one after another, in silence. Soon she also was summoned ; and then the deserted guests gathered in the windows, speculating busily as to the facts and present state of the case.

Hotspur had dawdled. The coming information was too interesting for him to leave the room in ignorance. And now a word from him, betraying superior knowledge, caused the guests to swarm round him.

'It is *quite* true that the purse is lost ? and full of money ?'

'Quite ! Grace—.'

'Had to carry it, I hear—and dropped it ?'

Hotspur answered dubiously : 'Yes, she dropped it I suppose—.'

'Why—you don't imagine she lost it on purpose !'

'I don't know,' said he, for the fear had flashed through his mind whether this purse, with his money—his six pounds, might not be enough for the woman, and whether she might not be too ready to go for good, leaving the pony for him. So that he answered at random, for he scarcely heard the question.

‘The elder daughter went after it, I heard?’

‘Yes,’ chimed in another; ‘that I know, and against orders, for the Major said as much yesterday over his cigar: of course one can’t speak to the Colonel, he looks so annoyed whenever the subject is mentioned—but I don’t believe Miss Isabel is by any means free from blame.’

‘Indeed! why, how can she be concerned in it?’

‘I don’t know. But she had no business at that cottage, and she had charge of the purse, and I am sure the Major blames her for its loss. Of course I can’t know anything, but both Colonel and Mrs Walpole are grave out of all reason for the loss of the money. Rumour says mother O’Neill has been warned off. I myself saw Miss M’Ivor and her sister come in outrageously late last night—*after* the purse was known to be lost, and the warrant sent;—steal in by the back way—privately.’

‘I should make her pay for the loss,’ cried a listener.

‘So should I—she has money—I understand?’

‘Very little until she is of age. But I should insist on re-payment. Such a bad example for the younger ones, for of course that child Grace can know nothing better, if her sister leads—such a nice-looking girl too!’

‘Ah! but a deep one. I noticed her flush last night when the policeman’s message came in. My maid had been talking to me about it before. But here they come—I wonder what news! Good news, Major?’

‘Confound those girls,’ cried the Major. ‘Purse gone, mother gone! Well, nothing else could be expected. Of course she was wide awake enough to take warning. It was too bad of Isabel,’ he muttered under his mustaches.

‘Dear! dear!’ began somebody, ‘how sad.’ But a determinately cheerful summons from the Colonel to get to breakfast, and waste no more time from their shooting, *shut up* the subject, and caused both wife and guests to obey with speed.

What made the Colonel so shy of the subject? He was becoming seriously uneasy at the escape of this woman. It was of course most natural that she should hide; but he had long imagined that the place had some special attraction for her, and he half began to fear that the secret was not so absurdly insignificant as he at first thought. The policemen were inclined to believe that she was still lurking about the precincts of the Hall; and rumour said that she had been seen again near the house, after the warrant had been issued. A second examination of Grace had failed, as before—utterly. And why should she refuse to answer if there was nothing to conceal? Perhaps also the mother awakened in him a modicum of the superstitious dread with which she oppressed his dependents. It was sufficiently annoying altogether.

In the midst of all this in came Isabel for her mother's second cup of tea, which was always considered fresher and better when fetched from the breakfast-room.

She advanced to the breakfast-table without observing the dead silence that her entrance had caused, amongst the guests, because of their suspicions; with the Walpoles and her father, because she recalled the subject uppermost in their thoughts. She did observe it now, as she stood by her aunt, waiting for the cup to be refilled, and blushed in consequence, simply because everybody was watching her.

'Mother O'Neill cannot be found, Isabel,' said her aunt, very gravely.

'No, aunt;—I am very sorry!' she was going to add; but these thoughts crossed in her mind, 'perhaps this may save Grace;' 'but then papa will lose his money!' This, and the consciousness of many eyes upon her, oppressed her, so that she did not finish her sentence. Her uncle's eyes were keenly fixed on her; he was trying to discover whether her alarm was reawakened, but as she did not understand

this, her flush deepened painfully, and she hurried off as soon as her errand was done.

The party were dispersing slowly from the breakfast-room, when the Colonel was overheard saying to his wife, 'She ought to be under surveillance, Jane, I think; at least till the mother is caught.'

'I quite agree with you,' replied Mrs Walpole, 'certainly she ought.'

They were speaking of Grace, but the guests understood it of Isabel. 'Incarcerated for a while, and quite right too! I should make her pay,' remarked the folks to each other. 'Of course she will remain in till something turns up, for the sake of example,' observed another speaker.

Hotspur had sat most cautiously pettifogging up in the window corner, and he now emerged and proceeded after his affairs, having heard all, and comprehending that Isabel was at least in disfavour. As far as Grace was concerned, he had the greatest confidence in her powers of silence, but he was very glad Isabel was being put aside also. He stole a glance at the tower as he passed on to his skating, but he could see no signs of care or watching there; no appearance whatever that any one was thinking of it. Nor had any person inquired for the key. He began to hope again that matters were improving.

The guests, on their parts, were *quite* prepared for Mrs Walpole's announcement, that Isabel would take care of her mother the greater part of the day, to leave herself free for them, and thought the lady very clever to arrange it so quietly. In reality Grace was already under a sort of honourable arrest, which she resented extremely.

As for Isabel herself, not realising all this suspicion, she was calculating how far she could possibly repay her father a part of his loss. She was the inheritor of her aunt's small fortune; but as the speaker in the breakfast-room had

stated, only a small allowance came to her now ; and out of this, of course, she provided her own dresses, and equally of course, she was at the end of her quarter, and of all ready money, with no more to come until about the second or third week in January. And when she examined her little store, one small half sovereign was all she could muster, but a sorry substitute for L. 11. She felt extremely grieved for her father ; she well knew how much the loss was likely to annoy and inconvenience him, and she could not help him for a fortnight, and then only by about half. She took out the note-book of her schemes for the coming quarter, and scored a steady pencil mark through all that could possibly be discarded ; she wrapped up the pretty slippers that she was working for her mother, mournfully enough, but a few more skeins were needed for their completion, and she would have no money to buy them ; and still, the saddest thought of all was, that her father would be cramped all through this Christmas season, and she could not help him. The saddest thought, all but that of Grace ; and yet this dull weight Isabel was obliged to throw off as far as she could ; it was so impossible to do anything to help her.

Yet poor naughty sulky little Grace ! If she could only have got at her sister without seeing her, or told her, by saying nothing (always supposing that Isabel would not tell again), Isabel would probably have known all. Grace would have been so glad if she had known—but to tell her, or any one, or open her lips to speak, with or without compulsion ! No, assuredly NOT ; especially when all her tellings would be for the benefit of the elders.

The gentlemen went out for their shooting as early as they could get away ; but Mrs Walpole sent for Isabel from her mother's room to her own.

' Isabel,' she said, directly they were alone ; ' Is it of the slightest use your seeing your sister, do you think ?'

‘I fear not of the least, aunt! But I will try, if you wish it. I don’t like that secret, aunt.’

‘Nor—do—I. Nor I fancy does your uncle, though he says nothing. Yet I cannot imagine what possible object the mother can have, unless it be to get this money; and this it cannot be, because Grace’s carrying the purse was the purest accident yesterday?’

‘Indeed it was. Roger was to have carried it, and I had charge of it. I ought to have put it away perhaps. I wish I had.’

‘But you expected Roger to fetch it?’

‘Yes I did, and I was busy with mamma.’

‘But Isabel, what made you suspect that secret?’

‘Grace’s manner. She was in an agony of distress at first about the purse.’

‘But this shows the loss to have been unintentional.’

‘Yes; and so I most fully believe it to have been. But the moment I began to question her, she guiltily avoided all mention of the shrubbery walk or the mother; and the more I asked the more impenetrable she became. And yet she would not tell me a direct falsehood, when I asked point blank if a secret did exist. Aunt Walpole, I never have caught her in the smallest untruth,’ said poor Isabel, beseechingly.

‘No, I believe not; she would not condescend to it; she is not a girl to lie. But—bother her! I can’t help it, Isabel,’ cried aunt Walpole. ‘Then the woman.’

‘Answered in the wildest manner—wide of the mark at first—then refused to satisfy me about the purse, on the plea that I would not believe her if she told the truth. She undoubtedly has it!’

‘And means to keep it,’ observed her aunt.

‘And then at last,’ continued Isabel, ‘threatened all I told you, if I set the Justices on her, as she called it; and at last begged earnestly for time. This is what I think most of.

'Doubtless the mother is aiming at something, but whether anything to signify I cannot tell. With herself fled, and Grace 'under care,' I should think no great harm can happen. She always hung about the cliffs behind here, and has seemed fascinated by the place ; but she cannot possibly harm us, especially with only Grace for her coadjutor, that I can see. I think we may, indeed we must, wait patiently. But I am very sorry for your father. If you should discover anything, Isabel, of course I need not say, come to us at once—and if you should find speaking to Grace possible, I would try it—I scarcely think it is—but I am sure she likes sympathy if she can get it, unsought and unaccepted as it were !

'But what an "if!" aunt Walpole ; you see I neither sleep with her, nor meet her naturally—I must make an opportunity.'

'Yes—yes, I know !' and Mrs Walpole departed.

Isabel returned to her mother's room, glad of its rest, and of the blissful ignorance of its occupant. Until the purse was found or lost beyond recovery, Mrs M'Ivor was not to be told ; so the tranquil atmosphere of that pretty room could be enjoyed with no fretting, jarring remarks, to disturb its serenity ; and thoroughly restful Isabel found it.

Poor little Grace ! what a pity it was that she had exiled herself from it and all other soothing influences. She was 'under nurse's care,' and so to remain until all was explained. Two or three times, notwithstanding her hopelessness, Isabel sought the nursery, and dismissed nurse on some pretext, and sat on, playing with baby, and trying to attract her sister. It was of no avail ! Grace would have given anything, but given up her temper, to speak. And poor Isabel returned to her mother again and again, more sad and out of heart each time : and so these two girls, though so strongly attracted to each other, were held asunder by as perverse an imp of mischief as ever meddled in human affairs, and muddled them.



CHAPTER XVI.

CHIVALRIC BILL.

'Young knight whatever, that dost armes professe,
And through long labours hunttest after fame,
Beware of fraud, beware of ficklenesse,
In choice, and chaunge, of thy deare-loved dame ;
Least thou of her believe too lightly blame,
And rash misweening doe thy hart remove :
For unto knight there is no greater shame,
Than lightnesse and inconstancie in love.

* * * * *

Fairy Queen.



UT another member of the family was by no means disposed to take matters so patiently. Billy had been in the breakfast-room all the time. He had lingered to catch a sleepy fly in the window pane, instead of running after his companions, and Billy had heard all, and Billy was astonished and furious by turns.

The idea of Isabel being blamed by all those big strangers, who could know no more of her than the man in the moon, who could not guess how good she was !—the idea of her being punished ; for he supposed 'under surveillance,' and 'incarcerated' meant that, though what they really did mean, he did not know—and obliged to pay that large sum. He had heard too, a whisper last

night, though from whom and when he could not remember, that Isabel and Grace had warned off mother O'Neill—well, supposing they had, what then—he had been nearly as bad (as *bad* as Isabel ! what a misapplication of words). Of course he hated the old woman ; he was bound as a 'Walpolite' to do so. But still he had cherished a warm corner of respect for her in his heart, ever since she had dared his nurse in that courageous manner ; and when he heard yesterday that the police were after her, he had all the will to run and tell her to get out of the way.

Of course he could not have done so ; but if Isabel had thought it right, then it would somehow have been right, so Billy judged ;—all the same, he didn't believe she had been at all.

And now he had seen her waiting for the cup, flushing and shrinking so painfully—as Isabel confessed to herself so foolishly—and all those people looking at her, whilst he knew what they were thinking of. He drew back in wrath into his window corner, and would watch no longer. Then he had overheard about surveillance and incarceration, and—it was more than Billy could bear, and he marched indignantly off into the school-room to ascertain the sense of those words. He was not comforted by finding it in his dictionary.

Soon after, meeting his sister, he stopped her with the question, uttered in a low awed tone, 'How much is it, Issy?'

'What, dear?' she replied, in so troubled a voice.

'I mean,' said Billy, more boldly, 'how much money is it?'

'Eleven pounds, I fear, dear. It is a large sum for poor papa to lose ! And I cannot repay him for a whole fortnight,' she added, almost to herself.

And Billy would have asked more questions, had she not looked so unhappy.

So he only put up his face for a kiss, which his sister

gave him, tenderly enough, and it comforted her ; and then ran off to his cousins Clara and Amy.

His tale petrified these two girls with horror. Their idol Isabel to be in disgrace. They could not, would not believe it. But when Billy assured them that it was true, and that she was 'under surveillance,' whatever precisely that might mean ; at anyrate in a jolly row, and to be 'incarcerated,'—and Billy made an awful mouthful of this word, because he had quite carried away its meaning out of the dictionary—for he did not know how long ! until the old woman was caught, or if that was never, until she could pay the terrific sum of eleven pounds, which she said herself would be a whole fortnight—Billy stopped to take breath ; and Amy and Clara began eagerly to consider how they could help her, breaking off, however, every now and again, with exclamations of distress and unbelief.

One mode of relief would be catching mother O'Neill. Billy was quite prepared to try ; but with some hesitation he confessed, that he was not quite sure Isabel would be glad if they did. The girls wondered at this. But all three loyally dismissed every shadow of doubt upon the fair fame of their beloved friend, and set themselves to consider the second chance. Could they help her to pay ! what could they give ?

Billy had half-a-crown ; they had better take it at once, he thought, though he was certain he should not spend it.

Clara and Amy had each something in the Post Office Savings Bank. Seventeen shillings or a pound, Amy thought hers amounted to. Clara had no certainty about her money, but she was sure it was not more than Amy's. She thought it was about the same. This would come to nearly L.2. Perhaps Tom would help, but he had just bought a bat, and they thought that he never kept very much anywhere. Billy would go and speak to Roger and Tom, who were both on the ice sliding, and perhaps they could tell him

how to get at the money, for he did not know in the least how to proceed. None of the three questioned their right to take out their money at once, since it was 'to help Isabel.'

He fetched his cap, and ran away at once; whilst Clara and Amy nearly had a good cry together, now that the first excitement had a little subsided.

'What can we do to help Isabel?' they eagerly inquired of each other. 'could we go and see her, and tell her how good she is? No! if she is in disgrace, she may be ashamed, and perhaps would rather be alone. *She* ashamed, oh?' and the poor children groaned again.

'But if Isabel is incarcerated—Amy, what does that mean, really and truly?' asked poor little Clara, with widely-opened eyes.

'Shut up in prison, really,' replied Amy dolefully. 'But you know it can't be *that*. Oh dear! Clara, it is all wrong. I am sure it is.'

'Shall we go and see if Grace can help us. She may know, and if she hears this, perhaps she may tell. Isabel can't be naughty, that's certain.'

But not a bit of it. Both girls hurried off and found Grace, and assailed her on both sides, with a stormy tale, and stormy questioning. She would not believe the one; she refused all reply to the other; and they left her disappointed and impatient.

Master Billy, in the mean time, made the best of his way to the pond. He found the sliders and skaters as busy as ever. Hotspur skating, Roger with him; but Tom was at some distance.

'Roger! I want to speak to you directly, please.'

'What do you want then? make haste. Hotspur and I can't wait.'

'I don't want Hotspur,' whispered Billy, 'I want you.'

A hint overheard which made Hotspur hang about the pair to listen further.

‘Have you any money, Roger, you can give me? Amy and I and Clara can make up nearly two pounds to free Isabel, though I only give half-a-crown,’ added the honest little fellow, ‘for Isabel. She has to pay eleven whole pounds; and is to be *shut up* (Billy’s translation of incarcerated) till she can get the money! all about that purse, you know.’

‘That Grace lost,’ interposed Hotspur.

‘That you were to have carried,’ added Billy.

‘I am glad I have no younger brother!’ remarked Hotspur, as he skated away in a circle.

‘How dare you, Billy! speak as if it was my fault! I never made Grace lose that purse. Grace is always getting us into scrapes. I have no money. Go and ask Grace. It is very annoying being pestered so!’

‘Very! I should think,’ observed Hotspur, skating past again.

‘But, Roger! think of poor Isabel. She looked so ashamed and sad when she came in for mamma’s tea; and now she must stay up, with all those people here too!’

‘What in the world has Isabel to do with it? she must have been interfering again, in spite of all I said. And now she’ll make us all pay! It serves her right to do it herself. My father said nothing about it yesterday at all.’

‘But won’t you help a bit? not a bit, Roger?’

‘Come Roger!’ yelled Hotspur, as he skated by again.

‘Oh, I hate him,’ muttered Billy. ‘Roger! do think about Isabel—what are we to do?’

‘Let her alone. Don’t you interfere too, as she has. Let her alone.’

‘Oh—Roger—!’ exclaimed his little brother, ‘Isabel would never leave us alone in a mess.’

‘Well, well, leave it to your elders then,’ retorted Roger,

becoming very uneasy, 'you can do nothing. I will see about it by-and-bye.'

'I shan't wait,' said Billy, turning sorrowfully away.

'Is he going to beg of the public!' sneered Hotspur, in another circling.

'No! I say, Billy! remember not one word of this to anybody but me! Do you hear now?'

'Yes—but I shan't mind,' replied Billy the Bold.

'Then I'll make you,' cried Roger, springing after him.

But Billy was off and out of sight before Roger had divested himself of his skates.

What was Billy to do next? He was perplexed, but he thought at last, that he had better set his wits to work, to gather information about getting the money. He remembered that the lodge-keeper's book had once returned with his sister's. And it struck him that she might know. He started off to ask. And she could tell him all about it. But he learnt, with great distress, that it would take him three days to get the money. It was very sad to think of shutting Isabel up for so long! The woman told him that he must get some proper forms to be signed, and that he would save one day's post if he went to town for them at once.

Billy therefore surveyed himself from head to foot, and decided that he was tidy enough to run on at once. To be sure he had no gloves, which mamma liked him to wear in the town, but he thrust both hands into the very depths of his pocket, and determined not to take them out again under any provocation, until he got to the Post Office. The lodge-woman said: 'Bless his little heart, he looked very nice indeed!' But Billy did not like being called *a little heart*, and ran very ungraciously off. He walked sometimes, sometimes ran, sometimes danced, and hopped over the frozen mud heaps by the road side; sometimes he stopped to strike his heel into the ice on the pond; but he

made very good travelling altogether, and reached town with his hands safely concealed, though how often they had come out, he could not have told. He repaired to the Post Office, and obtained the required information, with the notices. He was grieved to find that the money could not be had until Thursday morning, but that would do for the Twelfth Cake party. And surely no one would keep Isabel in on Wednesday, if all that money was coming on Thursday.

So Billy started for home. He arrived in perfect safety, and instantly sought his cousins, who had been anxiously watching for him. They highly applauded his spirited exertions; but the sight of the notices half frightened them. They put their heads together over them, consulting and wondering all three. At last they decided on asking Mrs Thirswell's advice. She had money in, they knew, and moreover she had once put in theirs for them. She listened to their tale with the keenest sympathy.

'Bless my soul,' she exclaimed. 'that sweet young lady! Miss M'Ivor, to punish her! whatever can they all be thinking of, and for eleven pounds! Now look here Master Billy, when you've got all this, you've only two pounds. Now I've got a deal more, and I say, I'll draw mine out too, if Miss M'Ivor will accept of it, and then, you know, she'll be free at once.'

Billy only replied by smothering nurse with kisses.

'Bless the boy! yes, Master Billy, there, there, there! kissing him, 'that'll do! I shan't be fit to be seen.'

'What are you looking so grave for Amy?' exclaimed the boy, 'when I am so happy. Aint you pleased too?'

'I am afraid,' said poor Amy, 'that Isabel will never take it. I am sure she won't take it from you, nurse. It is such a large sum.'

'Now, Miss Amy! if Miss M'Ivor does not like to accept it, which she'd be most welcome to, for she's a dear

young lady, she can borrow it, and repay me as she can. It is all savings, Miss, so I am in no hurry for it. I guess, I understand what its all about—'

'She must come down, she must come down,' cried Billy. 'Yes, nurse, yes, she must come down. You are a very jolly old brick of a nurse, she must come down.'

'It is very good indeed of you, nurse,' said Amy. 'I hope we may pay you again soon,' but she felt very doubtful how far their plan was desirable.

However, the eagerness of her cousins was not to be withstood; and Amy consented to draw up a paper to Major M'Ivor, which was to be signed by the three, promising to pay the money on Friday morning, and petitioning that Isabel might be released and forgiven at once. This the three children signed, and waited anxiously for the afternoon to present it.

At length the darkness began to set in, and the welcome shots of the sportsmen were heard announcing their return. Billy flew to the yard, where they were assembled, and seizing upon his father, and dragging him aside, he thrust this important document into his hand, and stood dancing before him in hopeful anticipation of a kind answer.

He was wofully disappointed.

'What's this?' growled the Major. '"We will pay the whole eleven pounds by Friday—please do forgive Isabel, and let her out now!"—what's all this about! Let her out! who? Isabel—what the deuce do you mean? How are you going to get all this money?'

'We have some, and nurse lends us the rest,' said trembling Billy.

'Nurse lends! Billy!' exclaimed the Major. 'Now Billy remember, I'll have nothing of this sort—Isabel ought to have known better, and you may tell her so! It's worry enough to have lost the money without all this. I take

nurse's money indeed ! go away Billy !—Here, take this precious paper,' and the Major thrust it into his breast.

Poor Billy ! His heart was nigh unto bursting. He did not offer to touch the paper, but he wandered disconsolately on until out of sight ; and then he burst into tears ; poor little boy.

But big Howard's father passed close to him.

'Hullo ! little chap ; Billy ! my boy ; why, what's the matter with you ?'

And his tone was so kind, that Billy was encouraged to tell his tale of woe, and show his paper.

Mr Howard looked very, very grave as he read it ; and he stood afterwards for a minute or two considering, before he replied.

It seemed an age to the boy. At length Mr Howard asked, if it was all the children's own money ; and he looked graver than ever when he heard whose it was.

'You can offer it to Miss M'Ivor,' he observed. 'Perhaps your father might—if she will allow it !'

'Will you ask him ?' asked the boy eagerly.

'I scarcely know—does Miss M'Ivor wish it ! I should almost think she will prefer remaining upstairs.'

This view of the case had never struck Billy as possible : 'Why ! why ?' he asked.

'I should think she will never take nurse's money.'

'But nurse wished it—she asked it.'

'Yes—,' replied Mr Howard, dubiously.

'Why should Isabel mind, Mr Howard ?'

'Mind ! what do you mean ?'

'Will she be vexed ? can she be vexed ?'

'Vexed ! I can't tell ! I fear it is a bad business,' exclaimed the puzzled gentleman, 'a very bad business.'

'No, it is not—at least not Isabel,' exclaimed Billy, forgetting everything else in his eagerness. 'Isabel is a dear,

dear, dear girl—and she is very unhappy ; and it is a shame !’ and Billy burst into a roar of angry grief.

‘What’s a shame?’ Mr Howard asked ; though strange to say, he did not seem affronted by Billy’s fierceness. Billy vouchsafed no reply, if he even heard his question, and Mr Howard exclaimed : ‘I fear Miss M’Ivor has acted very wrongly !’

‘She has not ! she can’t !’ roared Billy, kicking him away violently. ‘She can’t ! she can’t.’

He was not to be appeased. So Mr Howard walked thoughtfully away. Now it struck him as so true, that exclamation : she can’t, she can’t ! that by the time he had reached the door, he turned back to the yard to look for the little lad ; but Billy had carried himself and his griefs into the warmth of the woodhouse, and was there sobbing his heart out. Mr Howard was very sorry, and seating himself close to him, succeeded in drawing out all his eager proceedings, during the day, for his sister’s defence.

‘Well,’ said the gentleman kindly, ‘I think all this earnest kindness deserves reward. I dare say if you ask your father again, he will let you free Isabel.’

‘Will you ask him?’ exclaimed Billy again.

‘I ! well—yes—give me the paper ! It is very awkward,’ thought Mr Howard. But as clearly as the glimmer of a distant lamp would allow, he wrote under the children’s name : ‘Excuse the liberty, my dear Major—but listen, if you can, to your gallant little son, yours, with apology, W. C. Howard.’

Billy’s thanks were few, but hearty ; and he proceeded, rather timidly, to execute his commission. But his stout little heart returned to him, as he remembered Isabel ashamed upstairs. So walking boldly up to his father, he put the paper into his hands, saying : ‘Mr Howard said perhaps you would, papa !’

The Major read it again : the sentence at the bottom

twice: 'Hang his impertinence!' he muttered; 'Isabel ought never to have allowed it. But let her come down? yes,—of course; what should stop her!'

'But you won't scold her papa?' said Billy, checking his joy, 'because that's worse than staying away.'

'Be off, sir!' exclaimed his father, with that look that the children dreaded.

'Yes, papa—but this!' said Billy boldly, 'you *won't* scold her, because that's worse than anything.'

And the boy stood before his father with such full determination to shelter his sister, that the Major gave way, and consented to vent upon Isabel none of his annoyance, at this strange ill-arranged supply of his needs, for so he read the children's request. And Billy bolted, like a shot from a bow, straight up to his cousins: 'Its all right, she may come down! But I thought I never should.'

'Oh! we are so glad! we were afraid you would not, when you were so long coming back. Now we must tell her; who shall tell her? you? or you? or you?'

'No; let us all three go—and nurse, you ought to come too.'

'No, indeed, it would be taking a great liberty,' replied nurse, who was rejoicing in the children's success. 'No, indeed, I would not. But you had better go at once, or she will be too late for dinner.'

The children took the hint, and hurried away.

They sent a message in by Mrs M'Ivor's maid, that Isabel was wanted directly, that very minute; and Isabel came at their call.

She looked worn and sad; and there were dark lines under her eyes, which betokened weeping.

But the two young children, full of hope, that now they would drive away all her sorrow, dragged her into the dressing-room, and pushing her into a chair, lit the candle with vehe-

ment eagerness, and spread the paper before her. Amy followed more thoughtfully, and stood a little behind her cousin.

Isabel read the paper through twice—puzzled, and puzzled—and burst into tears. It was a revelation to her; and filled her cup overfull!

The dismay of Clara and Billy was tremendous.

‘Aint you glad! are you sorry?’ they exclaimed, their own eyes filling from sympathy.

‘Yes, dears, yes, most thankful for your kindness,’ murmured Isabel, as soon as she could speak. ‘It is most good and kind of you; but how did you get the money? and ought I to take it? How could you get so much money! It is very kind indeed.’

‘And are we not very glad, and is it not all right?’ inquired Billy.

‘Tell me how you got the money. I am taking it from you, dear Billy, and that is not all right!’ said his sister, pressing him to her fondly.

‘As if I did not like it, Isabel! anything for you.’

‘And nurse said she was so glad too,’ said Clara.

‘Nurse!—is any of it hers?’

‘Yes—a lot—but we are to pay back as we can—it is only lent, her’s. But she would have given it—only she thought you had rather not.’

Amy saw by her cousin’s quivering lip and heightened colour, how this information was affecting her. So, reminding the others that Isabel would be late for dinner, she got them to run away much comforted by their sister’s tender thanks, but a little puzzled to find that she was unhappy still.

Amy was leaving the room, when Isabel called her back. ‘Amy!’ she said, ‘what am I to do! what does it all mean? It was very good of them—but, I cannot understand it at all.’

‘I don’t quite know,’ replied Amy, ‘we all got very eager. And it was not until I heard how it was all to be done, that I

began to puzzle about it. But you must have been helped, Isabel. You could not pay all that yourself. And we were very glad to help you,' she exclaimed, throwing her arms round her cousin's neck. 'Isabel, dear Isabel, indeed we were.'

'You are too kind, most kind; for it was my doing partly, that has lost that purse. And Amy, you are paying it all.'

'No,' said Amy hesitating, and yet continuing with true delicacy. 'Nurse's will be returned. You will have to pay her back; only you can have it now.'

'True, true, oh, thank you, yes! But your's, my darling, and Clara's?'

And how would we like it better spent, Isabel?' was the hearty reply.

'And am I to go downstairs to-night!'

'And face all those people,' said Amy, stroking her cousin's blushing face, whilst her own eyes filled with tears. 'I knew that it would be hard work; but Billy and Clara could not bear to have you up here, and I did not like to vex them by saying anything.'

'But, Amy dear, I am not in disgrace that I know of! I did not know that I was——,' she added, as poor Amy's tell-tale face betrayed her fears, though she vehemently exclaimed,

'And never ought to be, I am sure, Isabel, if everybody knew everything. But Billy said——.' And with much fondling and much sorrow, Amy repeated her little cousin's troubled tale. And though Isabel felt sure that the incarceration concerned Grace, and that her aunt, at least, did not suspect her, still, to confirm its truth with all the guests, she remembered the glances round the breakfast-table, which had oppressed her so heavily, and now read Mr Howard's signature to the paper.

'Oh, Amy!' she exclaimed, hiding her face on her kind little cousin's shoulder, 'I never was ashamed like this before!'

'And ought not to be now, I am certain,' repeated

Amy. 'But, perhaps, if, as I fancy, Isabel, it is you instead of Grace, you will save her from a great deal. Blame will only pain you, but it does her so much harm. And the truth must be known some day.'

'I may, perhaps, shelter her by being patient; at any rate, I can't help myself,' said Isabel, sadly. 'I will dress and come down, Amy.'

'Oh! by-the-bye, it is better though,' cried Amy, suddenly recollecting herself. 'Mamma said we were all to have our tea in the school-room, and not come down to dinner; we were to come down afterwards.'

'That is better,' said Isabel. 'Well, I will dress; and I will come and speak to nurse when you are at tea.'

'We shall be in the school-room, but nurse will be in the nursery. You can come there——.'

'Very well; I will come.'

And Amy left Isabel to dress. The poor girl's colour changed so fast. Oh, those dear children! if they had only never told her, or let her remain upstairs. But they could not understand, and they should not know.

She repaired as soon as she was ready to the nursery, and there, with much graciousness, though with much shyness and pain, she gave nurse thanks for her timely help. Nurse acquitted herself equally well; she knew what her young mistress must be feeling, and sympathized with her sincerely. At the same time, it was so perfectly true that she was glad to help her, that she could say so with an honest warmth that touched Isabel much. Nurse's trust in her was entire. She thought, too, that she had guessed the cause of her silence, because she could not believe but that a word from the elder sister would at once lay the blame, where it must be due, on Miss Grace.'

Then Isabel summoned all her courage for the expedition into the drawing-room.

She found all the young people assembled in the inner drawing-room, excepting, of course, Grace. Nor could she be unaware of the curious gaze the strangers bent upon her. Hotspur had kept up Roger's irritation so effectually against his sister (hoping himself that the L. 11 might not be forthcoming), that the boy suffered his manner to be harsh and unkind towards her, when she most needed his support.

But Amy had, with a great effort, announced her cousin's probable appearance downstairs, and declaring her own entire assurance of her goodness, she had earnestly begged that no allusion to anything likely to annoy her might be made. Hotspur began to sneer, and Billy to defend, but big Howard interfered, and with a few manly, spirited, supported Amy, and shamed Isabel's detractors, for, of course, the gossip had spread considerably. He could not, of course, judge, he said, knowing nothing of the facts; but if ever appearance was a proof of goodness, he thought Miss M'Ivor was beyond blame.

This was just before Isabel entered. And there were not many of the young group who watched her approach, who could not have echoed his words, or who did not rise to greet her warmly. When the elders came from the dining-room, several of the ladies repaired to the children's drawing-room to speak to her, as much, it is to be feared, from curiosity as kindness.

And, unfortunately, the three elders chiefly concerned gave colour, by their manners, to the suspicions afloat. The Major was annoyed, very much annoyed; he was not allowed to speak about it either, and so he showed it. The Colonel and his wife were perplexed, and therefore grave. They were not by any means unkind to Isabel, but they knew no reason for especial attention to her, and therefore showed none.

'Dear me! as cold as a stone to her. Didn't you observe? There *can* be no doubt now. How very sad!' was a pretty general remark.



CHAPTER XVII.

TRACKED.

‘ Say, shall my little bark attendant sail,
Pursue the triumph, and partake the gale.’
POPE’S ‘ Essay on Man,’ Epistle 4.



OTSPUR had engaged to meet the mother about eight o'clock. And as the time approached, he stole away from the house.

He was in capital spirits. He considered himself quite a fine fellow, for the manner in which he had been sowing mischief among his companions, and he expected to reap a full harvest of praise. He forgot to make allowance for the chilling effect of two nights and a day in the frosty air, with the prospect of another to come, nor for the painful conviction of being a hunted person. He encountered mother O'Neill shortly after he had crossed the ground between the house and the tower, and he met her with a low salutation of triumph.

‘ Well, mother O'Neill ! 'scaped the pursuers yet ? We'll carry the day and the tower too. I have managed for you capitally, ca-pi-tally ! Now, I'll just tell you :— first place, 'twas I sent Grace on that errand, which gave you the purse, that was no bad job ; second place, I see

Roger snarling with her again. He and she had another set-to, which drove her furious, and then I got the key. I—got—the—key ! a very good job indeed ; because you could not get it, mother O'Neill ! Then when Isabel came from your house, and told her father that you had the purse, as you have, you know, mother, I warned you in time to be off, otherwise you would have been in choky now, and the tower, and all that, nowhere. This *is* a lot of your work done, mother ?'

'The devil's work, you mean, young master ;' growled the woman.

'Now ! the devil's work or not ; 'tis yours all the same, and you ought to be thankful to me for—.'

'Where's the key ?'

'In there, safe,' replied Hotspur, nodding towards the house.

'Haven't you brought it ?'

'No !' replied the boy, rather exultingly.

'Then the pony goes up to your father's this evening ! or stay, he had better come here ; your people are out !' exclaimed the woman, angrily.

'Now, why, mother ? I'll bring the key to-morrow. I had to slip off as I could, when they all came out from dinner, I could not have got the key in time.'

'I'll send up the pony.'

'Now, why ? Nonsense, I'll not fail you to-morrow, where am I to meet you ?'

'I'll send up the pony—you get me that key !'

'Mother, you're foolish !' exclaimed Hotspur. 'I'll come with the key to-morrow, and I'll not fail you.'

'You are a bad, untrustworthy boy,' returned she. 'I'll trust you no further than I can see you—not one step—you get me the key, or I'll send the pony.'

'And if you send the pony, I'll tell of the purse, and

also that we are to meet to-morrow night; so there! we are quits, I think.'

'You won't fail, then?' she said, after a moment's pause, for she felt the force of his words.

'No; by eight to-morrow night, with the dog and the dress. But how shall I manage about the dog?'

'Send for him! there's to be a rat hunt, isn't there?'

'Yes, but not yet.'

'And you can't get him! and haven't got anything ready, I suppose?'

'I—I—you are a day too soon, mother O'Neill.'

'You are safe to be many days too late,' returned she.

A slight rustling in the bushes startled both at this moment; so, merely murmuring, 'Be ready,' she moved rapidly and noiselessly away. Hotspur followed her example, though in a different direction; but he was much crest-fallen, for he had gained none of the *éclat* he expected.

He returned to the drawing-room, the delicious warmth of which was very comfortable after the cold outside. He had forgotten how blue his cheeks would probably be, and was bothered by more than one exclamation about them, from the juveniles.

'Hotspur has been moon-gazing,' said one; 'look at him. How cold he is!'

'Or counting the stars;—are they all out, Hotspur? where can you have been?'

'I have been seeing about my dog,' replied the boy, hurriedly. 'I have thinking it's a pity not to get him for the rat hunt, Tom.'

'Bob Dacres will bring plenty, and he's not very fond of other dogs joining; but, I daresay, yours may if you care about it. But what could you do about it to-night?'

'William Luxton, you know, is an old boy of ours. He could get him.'

‘He is going with my father to-morrow, with the ponies and grub for the early luncheon,—when did you ask him to get your dog?’

‘In the morning, if any time; or, I can get it myself to-morrow after breakfast.’

‘That will be best, I think,’ replied Tom; ‘unless I can arrange anything with Luxton. I’ll ask my father—.’

‘No, no!’ exclaimed Hotspur, hastily; ‘pray don’t. I’ll get the dog to-morrow somehow.’

‘To-morrow or Thursday. The hunt is not till Friday.’

‘Very well, very well; I’ll manage it.’

‘How uncivil you are for a host, Tom,’ remarked Roger, reproachfully. ‘You seem to grudge both the man and the dog! Hotspur, you and I will walk over to-morrow morning.’

Tom threw down his cards decidedly, looking very hot.

‘Uncivil!’ he exclaimed; ‘I’ll go and ask my father! he objects to strange dogs about, not I—.’

‘Don’t, pray don’t; pray don’t!’ cried Hotspur, who had suddenly recollected the last adventure of his dog in that house; and who was, moreover, in a mortal stew, lest his multiplied deceits should be discovered. ‘Roger, I wish you would be quiet!’

‘Well, I like to see boys civil,’ replied Roger.

Tom walked off. Hotspur tried to follow him, but he was too far gone. Colonel Walpole was playing whist. The boy approached his father, and waited by his side for a minute or two. But finding that he could not interrupt him, he passed on and left the room.

‘Oh, he has gone to seek Luxton,’ groaned Hotspur to himself. ‘Bother Roger; how I will bother him to-morrow night, if it is not all found out before!’

And Tom found Luxton.

'Here, Luxton,' said he, 'you must go early after Hotspur Montgomery's dog. You must mind you are not late.'

'After what, sir?' asked Luxton.

'After Hotspur's beastly little dog,—he has told you, has he not?'

'No, sir. Master Hotspur has not spoken to me at all, sir.'

'No!' repeated Tom, in surprise. 'Are you sure, Luxton? He said just now that he had been out to see you. He came in so cold, he had certainly been out.'

'I have not been out of the house, sir; I have not seen him anywhere. But I heard he was out, sir—and,' Luxton hesitated,—'and they think they've seen mother O'Neill's red cloak out there too. I don't know, and no one knows; but we at Sir William's didn't used to trust Master Hotspur very much, sir! He's just come in, hasn't he? I reckon he'd more to do with the warning that old woman than Miss M'Ivor or Miss Grace either, sir!' muttered Luxton, as he prepared to pass through the passage door.

Tom's suspicions returned in full force. He remembered the walking up the wrong road too! and he was too much occupied to answer Luxton's remark. At length he observed—

'I had better tell my father if any trace of the old woman has been found.'

'Taint much good, sir, yet; Jones will be sure to tell if he gets on the right track.'

However, Tom returned to the drawing-room, and quietly reported the fact, or the suspicion of a fact rather, to his father; and its effect was to cause a general pause of eager interest.

Major M'Ivor jumped up, and ran out to see. The Colonel did not follow his example, thinking it best not to interfere with the scouts, who might be engaged in a silent

pursuit, and balked by a sudden rush of assistants. But the news excited him, and he involuntarily glanced at his wife and niece. Most eyes followed in the latter direction ; and, of course, suspecting, fancied that they saw fresh signs of guilt in the conscious troubled look which their own persistent gaze had called up, and which Isabel would have given the world to repress.

The really guilty Hotspur escaped observation by all but Tom, who felt nearly sure of his being aware of the mother's presence, and quite sure of his duplicity. It struck him at once, how probable was Luxton's surmise, that the warning had been given by Hotspur ; and he glanced at Isabel to see if he could ask her, whether Hotspur could have overheard anything, when he observed her distress, and the watch that many were keeping upon her.

It may be doubted whether Billy could have felt more fiercely determined to defend her, than Tom did at that moment ! But there was nothing to be done, and the whole occurrence passed away. The remembrance, however, of it rested in the minds of many present, and confirmed grievously the general opinion against Isabel. She was fully aware that such must be the case, and this again had its damaging effect in the shy conscious manner with which she returned the salutations of the few, who wished her good-night, and with which she seemed to avoid all intercourse with her uncle and aunt.

Tom caught Hotspur's arm with the grasp of an ag-grieved giant, as the latter was sneaking up to bed, and muttered in his ear, in a whisper as clear and low as it was disagreeable :

'You never spoke one word to Luxton, you liar ; and you know all about mother O'Neill.'

'How dare you ?' growled Hotspur, shaking himself

loose ; but his tone faltered, and his eyes sank under Tom's indignant gaze.

'I'll tell my father !' exclaimed Tom, as Hotspur wriggled away among the rest, and disappeared upstairs. But he could find no opportunity that night, before he and Roger repaired to their tower.

'I tell you what it is,' said Tom, 'that Hotspur is just as sneaking as a fox ; he's a thoroughly false fellow.'

'I don't see what right you have to say anything of the sort,' replied Roger.

'I am sure he knows where mother O'Neill is, and what she's about. I believe he went out to see her to-night, when he told me that lie about Luxton ; and I fully believe that he went to her house yesterday instead of Bob's ; and it's much more likely that he gave her warning than that Isabel did, much more likely.'

'Many people think that Isabel helped her off, and so lost all the money,' said Roger.

'Isabel blushes up when her name is mentioned, as anybody would, suspected as she is. I say, Roger, what makes you so surly to Isabel ?'

'I !—I hardly knew that I was—she's always interfering !'

'Well ; but you are as unpleasant as possible, and it's all that Hotspur. I am sure he is after something ; I only wish that I could find out what ? How did Isabel come down, after all ? I heard some one say that she was to stay upstairs.'

'Oh, Billy has been bothering everybody about it ; I suppose he has managed it.'

'What do you mean ?'

And Roger in reply described Billy's visit to the skaters ; and by dint of Tom's determined questioning, he told of his own churlishness and Hotspur's interference.

‘I wish I’d been there,’ cried Tom; ‘Billy should not have begged in vain! Plucky fellow he is! But I am sure Isabel is worth working for, if any one is; I’ll get out of him all he has done.’

Roger’s conscience was becoming more and more uneasy, and in consequence he got more and more cross. He succeeded at last in shutting Tom up, and getting into bed in silence, but he could not succeed in stilling his own uneasy feelings. It resulted, however, in his determining that Hotspur was unfairly suspected, or rather, perhaps a very good fellow in spite of it, for he was not himself quite free from distrust; that Tom was cross, Isabel incomprehensible, Grace unbearable, and himself ill-used by them all.

The rustling in the bushes that had disturbed Hotspur and his companion, was probably caused by some wakeful beastie or other, stirring about in quest of a night’s resting-place. But the alarm it occasioned was well founded. The tell-tale red cloak had been recognised, and its wearer tracked early in the evening; and a glimmer of it in some uncertain light, whether of a lantern or otherwise, again caught attention as she parted from Hotspur. Stealthily she moved away; but not more so than others who followed. She became soon aware that her footsteps were dogged; and checking at once her worry and annoyance against Hotspur, she turned her whole attention to effecting her escape. She was shut out of her own cottage; the shrubbery walk was not safe for her, it was too well known as her retreat; these persons came between her and the roads in front of the Hall, whilst the whiteness of the ground rendered insecure the shelter of the bushes, on which she could rely when not chased. There remained no path open to her, but the one close under and past the house, the servants’ rooms, and the great gates of the yard;

a path fraught with danger. Nevertheless, a moment's consideration determined her to pursue it. If she were driven off the field of action, she might find it extremely difficult to return. She knew of no safe shelter for many a mile, and her poor limbs ached with fatigue and cold. She had not been without food, because she had carried her provisions with her, but she had had but little rest or sleep. She now passed rapidly behind a bush in front of the windows, in the middle of a garden, and crouching down, she looked carefully round and round, for several minutes. It was a good central situation. This flower garden was pretty clear of bushes, or shrubs, or high flower-beds, and for several yards on every side she must have seen, if any one approached her retreat.

She waited until one quarter of an hour had struck by the clock; then she arose, still under the shelter of her friendly bush, and turned her cloak, the grey lining outside, for the first time in her life; and trifling as the action was, it cost her a bitter pang. This effected, she crept along towards the corner under Mrs M'Ivor's bed-room, so to reach the back of the house, and carefully concealing herself, she succeeded in passing it in safety. But here the worst danger began. She heard voices in every direction, and footsteps here and there, and figures she could just distinguish. She dared not cross the drive, and it was equally unsafe to be lurking where she was. So she took the boldest course, and raising herself into a more erect posture, still keeping as near the wall as she could, came where she could look into the yard. The voices without grew louder and louder, and her own alarm increasing, she hurried through the gates, and on and on, through the yard, into the very woodhouse, which that afternoon had sheltered Billy.

This was at least warm, dark, and secluded.

It was most unlikely that any one would seek for her so near the enemy's quarters, therefore she determined to conceal herself there. She climbed over the large store of wood, and came to a few bundles of old mouldy hay, pushed inside. There she stretched her weary limbs, and fearfully sought repose.

But first she plotted for the morrow. It was puzzling to arrange how she should meet Hotspur, since this attempt had been so nearly discovered. But at length she determined to join the mummers at Walpole Hall, on the following evening. She had overheard, in one place and another, many of the arrangements made among the villagers; and she knew so many would be present, that they would conceal her. All were to choose their own costume, no questions were to be asked, and no order was to be observed among them; therefore she determined to be the ghost of the Lady Amy, and repeat, in that guise, some lines of an old ballad, she partly remembered, partly improvised. Thus she could get speech with Hotspur; thus she could tell him where to meet her. Afterwards she could meet him without much fear of detection, on that busy merry night, when the lights and the bustle in the Hall would throw the outer world into even darker shade than usual. So this matter arranged in her own mind, she fell asleep, intending to fetch her disguise as soon as it should be light enough, or as soon as the coast was clear.

A purpose which she safely effecting without discovery; she remained in some secure retreat during the whole of Wednesday, until the evening festivities began. Then she issued forth, and without being recognised, joined the motley crowd, who pressed on to astonish the inmates of the Hall with their fantastic masquerade.

But we are anticipating.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE APPROACHING FEAST.

‘Shaggy, and lean, and shrewd, with pointed ears,
And tail cropp’d short, half lurcher and half cur,
His dog attends him.’

Cowper.



WEDNESDAY was likely to be a day of the ‘jolliest’ of bustles. Because there was *the* party pushing its way in about five in the afternoon, driving every other occupation into corners with its preparations, and squeezing the two meals into a dinner at half-past three. This again necessitated a very early start for the gentlemen’s shooting party, and a scrambling breakfast, plentiful and good, but to be snatched, when possible, by anybody and everybody.

Hotspur took advantage of it to hurry Roger off. He feared, above all things, Tom and his tellings, and he determined to get out of his way. It was so many hours gained, if, after all, Tom told.

So he hustled Roger off. The latter was by no means happy. He had rather succeeded in silencing Tom than in satisfying himself as to his companion’s probity, and he regretted no little the quixotic politeness of the preceding evening, which had entailed this dog-fetching expedition upon him.

As for Hotspur himself, he was wondering what he should say if he was questioned. He thought he must say that Isabel had sent him. It was an abominable, bouncing falsehood, but he was so involved already, that one more or less could not be thought of. And if he said that Grace did, which was so far true, that her business was concerned in his going, she was no shelter, whilst Isabel would be. Why Isabel was so silent, or what she knew, he could not conceive; but he was convinced, nothing about the tower, or she would have told; of this he felt perfectly certain.

The walk, therefore, was not a very lively one; and when at length they reached the house, Pincher was, for a considerable time, nowhere to be seen. At length he came trotting leisurely up the avenue.

'Come, Pincher, come, come along sir, come——,' cried Hotspur, as Pincher paused at a prudent distance, considering.

'Pincher! Come, will you come?' as Pincher very reluctantly advanced, betraying a suspicious inclination to bolt.

'We shall never get on, you know,' observed Roger, 'like this; you'll have to carry him.'

'He's beastly heavy,' retorted Master Montgomery. 'You rascal, come!' he exclaimed, roughly.

'You must speak more gently, or the dog will bolt altogether. Here, poor dog! here, poor Pincher!'

'Oh, he can't bear strangers!' exclaimed Hotspur, remembering the duty Pincher was to perform that night, and fearful lest any affection should spring up between him and his victim. 'I'll call him. Here, Pincher, Pincher!'

And as the tone was kind, Pincher's tail wagged more freely, and he began to follow the boys as they walked from the door. But his mind was evidently not quite made up,

and his tardiness provoking his master, he received a sharp kick, which quite decided him. He stuck his tail between his legs, and took himself fairly off.

'Did you ever see anything so provoking!' cried Hotspur, as he ran after him. 'I'll beat him when I get him.'

'Then you won't get him to-night,' returned his companion, as he watched the dodging and chasing between the two. But the fun was irresistible, and he soon joined. After several minutes Pincher was caught, and deposited under Hotspur's arm to be carried, the alternative being to drag him with a short pocket-handkerchief the two or three miles to the Walpoles' house.

Hotspur got horribly tired, but he would not give up his burden; he did not want the other boy to befriend Pincher, and he dared not let the unwilling animal go free.

But his labour was lightened as they neared the Hall, for Bob Dacres and his tribe of canine followers emerged from a lane. Pincher was content to follow with so many of his own kith and kin surrounding him.

'Why, Bob,' cried Hotspur, 'I thought you were at Sincote Abbey hunting the rats!'

'Aye! so es wor,' returned Bob, trying to lift his tattered remains of a hat. 'But you zee, Measter Montgomery, the rats ull bide a while, and these ere gay dewings tew Walpole Hall wont. I'm a coming to the party to-night,' he added, addressing Roger triumphantly. 'If I can mak myself dacent;' and he surveyed his beautiful garments from top to toe.

'Better come as a mummer, I think,' said Roger, smiling.

'Oh! aye—zo I had; and zo I wull; never geed it a thought; that's an uncommon good thought tew! one needn't be dacent vor a mummer. I zay,' he added, in a lower tone to Hotspur, 'Wot's all this about the old mother?'

Hotspur coloured violently. 'I know nothing about her,' he exclaimed hurriedly; 'how should I know, indeed!'

'Wol; I thought everybody must know up to Walpole Hall. They say, the perlice is after her, and she's a hiding zomewhere.'

'My father's purse has been lost,' said Roger, who of course heard the question, and was disgusted by Hotspur's manner, 'and she is suspected of knowing something about it.'

'And she bolted before she could be caught! We suppose some one warned her!' said Hotspur the cunning.

'Aw; you *do* know zumat then after all,' observed Bob. 'I thought yer must. Why do 'em 'spect her, young master, do you know?' added he, addressing Roger, for Hotspur was extinguished.

'Because she was in the shrubbery walk when the purse was lost,' returned the latter boy, avoiding instinctively all mention of his sister's name.

'Aw,—replied Bob, meditatively; 'taint like the mother to steal like this. I reckoned her honest a bit. I be zorry. 'Tiscruel whisht to be turned out o' doors zich nights as these.'

No one spoke for a few moments. Then Bob turned suddenly upon Hotspur, though he asked in the most indifferent tone possible,

'What be thinking still about the Demon vor, young master?'

Roger turned with great curiosity. What a question it was! Who on earth could this Demon be? and he observed signs of still greater confusion in Hotspur's face, who stammered fiercely out: 'that he knew nothing about the Demon at all.'

'Aw;' was Bob's dry remark. His inquiry was suffi-

ently answered ; and he paced on, piecing together the various bits of information he had got, and taking no further notice of the boys. A few steps further on, and they separated.

‘It is most annoying,’ observed Hotspur ; ‘how every one suspects me of knowing about mother O’Neill.’

‘Why, you *do* know,’ replied his companion involuntarily, for Tom’s doubts returned to his mind too forcibly to be rejected.

‘Halloa, I say ! where’s Pincher ?’ cried Hotspur, suddenly ; ‘he’s gone with those others now !’ and he turned back to chase him. Roger followed more slowly. He not only thought Pincher a great plague, but he began to believe Hotspur a great cheat ; and if so, he had been ‘pretty considerably’ blinded. Besides, he was an honourable boy himself, and the suspicions against his companion, which were rapidly assuming the aspect of facts in his mind, created there a strong disgust against him.

However, Hotspur caught his dog, and returned. Pincher had been caught in a stormy quarrel with Tear’em, the two tumbling, snarling, and snapping over each other in the middle of the road, and Pincher was caught, and borne off by his master, before he was in the least aware of his approach.

The weary walk was at length over, and Pincher shut up in some outhouse by his master, Roger contemptuously left both.

And Hotspur, observing this, and owing him a grudge for it, joined the girls, who were making festons and wreaths in the banqueting-hall.

Very busy, indeed, they all were weaving decorations for the servants’ party. The hall was a large lofty room, with a raised part at its upper end, not the remains of an ancient dais, but a part set aside for spectators, when

the room itself was built for dancing. This opened at one end by large folding-doors, and, at the other, communicated with a billiard-room and the domestic offices.

The devices for ornamenting this great room had only been commenced that morning, and the imperative task of all the present workers was to scramble to an end of those still unfinished, and to hang up those completed.

Several were assisting in this task when Hotspur entered, and volunteered his services. Long wreaths already hung in festoons along the walls. One, the handsomest, was on the point of being raised behind the dais, on which a table of choice viands was being laid out for the 'quality.' The rest of the tables were arranged in double rows up and down the centre, leaving a broad open space in the middle.

Hotspur clambered eagerly up the step-ladder to assist in arranging the wreath, and looked down on the scene below. Little knots of workers were seated on the floor, half buried in the confusion of evergreens, firs, and holly, which they had dragged about themselves. They were twisting, tying, and adjusting their work, as if their lives depended on their despatch, whilst their feeders, groping about among the rubbish, were supplying them with little bunches, ready made for tying on. The servants, with long brooms, and much appearance of impatience, were sweeping together such heaps as were done with, whilst others were already spreading the tables, and bringing in the viands.

Hotspur surveyed them all for a minute, then seizing the middle of the wreath, he attempted to sustain its weight, and ease the labour of those who were hanging up its ends. He held it steadily enough, till the ends were safe, and then stretched up to fix its centre securely on its nail. But, alack-a-day! the best intentions will not always prosperous be. He over-reached himself, or the ladder slipped, or something happened—we cannot tell

what—but the ladder lurched out behind with dangerous precipitation, and left him hanging on the wreath itself for about half a second. Then down he came, wreath and all, crashing to the floor, just as the fall of the ladder resounded through the room. Everybody started to their feet.

‘Mercy on us!’ exclaimed one or two. ‘He isn’t killed; is he?’

‘A good thing that the table wasn’t laid!’ muttered the butler.

Hotspur scrambled up. Fortunately he was uninjured, nor was the mischief done to the work very material. A few minutes sufficed to repair it. But Hotspur made no further attempt to assist. He covered his retreat by some excuse, and repaired to his room to wash his hands, and prepare for the early dinner.

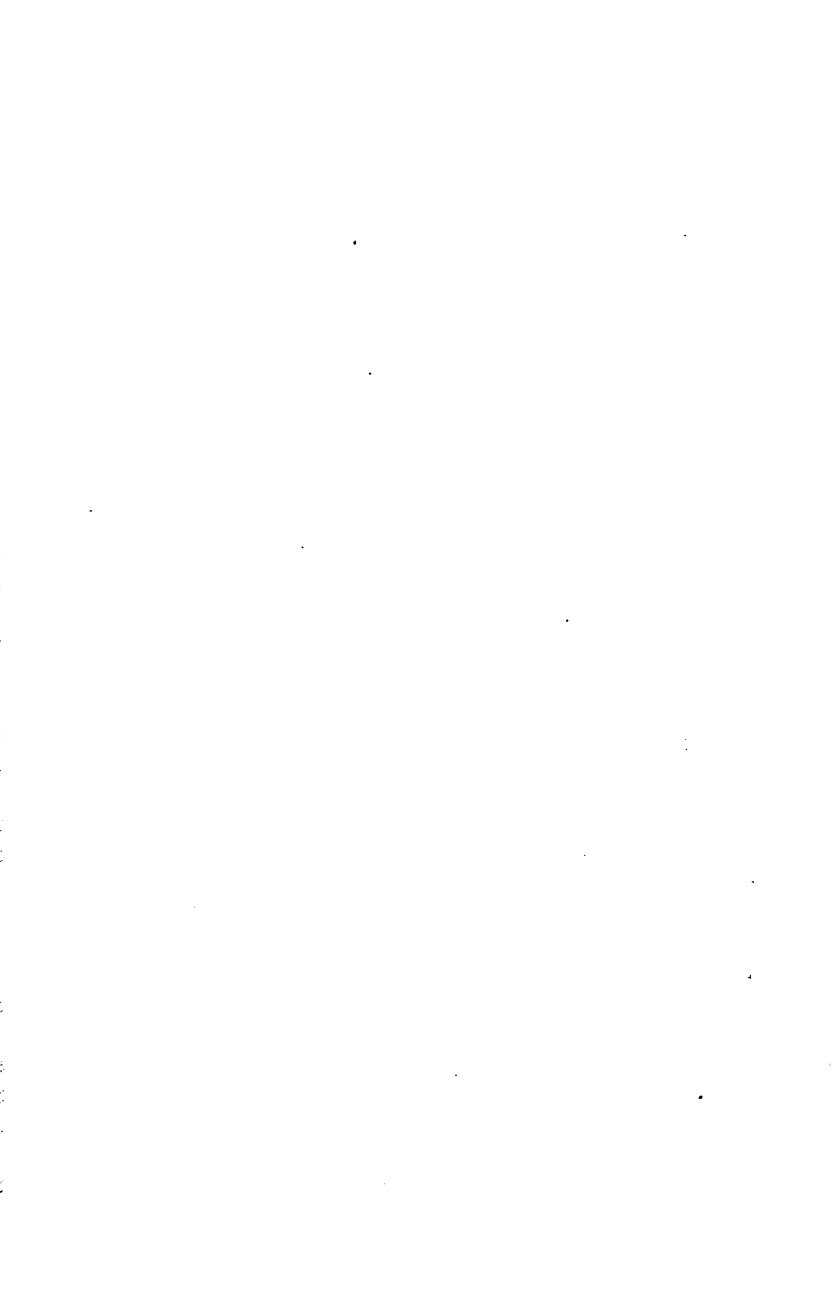
Suddenly he remembered that he had forgotten to provide himself with any disguise for the night. There, now! should he play the ghost among the mummers, as well as in the tower? Yes—no—he couldn’t tell. If he did, what was he to wear? if he didn’t, what was he to do or wear? He pondered over it spasmodically all the remainder of the afternoon, and reached the evening just as much unprovided and uncertain. A glorious boy he! for carrying out a difficult scheme. No wonder that mother O’Neill, with her anxiety and decision, was as much worried by him as he was oppressed by her.

Bob Dacres succeeded twice as well.

‘I say, you Kit,’ he exclaimed, as he stood over his wife that afternoon.

She was seated on a low stool, turning her gaily coloured rags out of the rag-bag. Worsteds, cloth, cotton, calico, linen, came pouring out, of all colours and all degrees of raggedness and cleanliness. She was sorting them.

‘I zay!’ her husband exclaimed. ‘Thee must find out





BOB AND KITTY.

zum'ut good out of all that. I'm a' goin' to the party to-night ; wont'ee come tew?'

Kit let the bag drop from her knees, and gazed at her husband, in blank, yet comic amazement.

'Thee'd be a pretty figure, and I'd be a wusser !' she replied at length.

Bob laughed merrily. 'I'm a thinking o' being one of they Christmasers, they mummers,' he returned.

'Oh ! ye'd best go as the rags of the old year, I'm a thinking !'

'Zo I wol ;—why, Kit, thee's got a brain a'ter all. Come and dress me up.'

Kit surveyed him with great amusement.

'Thee ought to wear tew hats,' she began. 'Three, if that one'll bear 'em up.'

'Which 'twon't noways ; tew's a plenty.'

'Stay ; I'll manage it.'

She seized his hat ; and stitching it somewhat together, she succeeded in rendering it strong enough to bear an assemblage of gloves, and other small garments stuck about it, with a fairly symmetrical result, considering the heterogeneous mass of which it was composed.

His coat she adorned in a similar manner, introducing also a knotted stick into each pocket, on which she hung stockings, handkerchiefs, neckerchiefs, rags of all sorts, being garments ; old shirts over a fringed pair of trousers, reaching to stockings with torn legs, to socks with frayed tops, to boots with hang-down ankles, over tattered shoes ! Bob's attiring caused immense mirth to himself and Kitty ; and, when complete, with a blackened face, he was quite fit for any society of mummers. Kitty now demanded the cause of this sudden freak, and she was surprised to see Bob turn really grave.

'Kitty !' quoth he, laying his finger on the side of his

nose ; ' Kitty, I know you'm safe. Now, when you meets mother O'Neill a' tramping to Tenderden farm, late, in the snow, with no zensible rayzin for it that anybody can give ;—when you find her a bargaining for a mad pony, as she couldn't do nawt wid, and can't pay for ;—when you'd a heard her zay, as she might be at this here party, with them as she hates, and who don't luv' her ;—when you vind that young measter Hotspur, who's there, is shyways after that pony ;—and when you vind the poor old mother a field-boarder, 'cos a purse has a been lost ; and that there young measter does know, and don't know, and gets wery red when he's axed any questions ! I reckon you'd like to go and zee the toss-up of 't all—eh ?'

' And d'ye 'spect to see the toss-up to-night ? I'd like to be going tew.'

' Wol, be the mother of rags, as I'm the father ! Zure, now, any respect'ble fam'ly would wear out more than this 'ere in one year. But I don't 'spect to zee the end o't, only the next act, zo tew zay.'

' Well, I'll goa,' said Kitty.

And erelong she was adorned as daintily as her husband. And this rare pair issued from their dwelling to join the motley group that were to assemble in due course at the village inn.

' Oh, I say ! es must tak' the babby !' exclaimed Bob.

' The babby ?' inquired his wife.

' Aye, Tear'em ; he'll break his yeart vor morning.'

' Nonsense,' cried she, ' wot ever shall us do wid 'en ?'

But it was of no use. Tear'em was carried off, with his queer master and mistress, to join in the revels at Walpole Hall.

A very different guest had just, about the same time, completed her delicate and pretty attire, and descended to join the party in the drawing-room. But with what

different feelings did the two Dacres and Isabel M'Ivor anticipate the glories of the coming evening !

To them, pure merriment might be mingled with just enough curiosity to give it spice. With her anxiety on her sister's account must mix with keen mortification on her own. Few outsiders could imagine how little the father and mother of rag had cause to envy this well-born, graceful girl. But (for that night) Bob and Kitty would scarcely have exchanged their rags for her troubles, however much they might have appreciated the generous motives which led her to endure them so patiently.

She entered the drawing-room very unobtrusively, and joined the young people. She had comparatively regained her confidence, for it was no longer a first meeting ; but she did not know that fresh and cruel suspicion had just been thrown upon her by Hotspur.

Tom had carried out his threat at the first opportunity that he could secure, that, namely after dinner, just before the mummers came, and in consequence of his story, Colonel Walpole had sent for Hotspur to inquire further.

The boy dared not deny, because he was not sure what Tom knew ; he dared not prevaricate before that alarming Colonel, so he perpetrated the wicked lie, that Isabel had sent him, what for he would not, might not tell ; and he fuddled his conscience somehow with the excuse, that what concerned the key concerned Grace, and what concerned Grace concerned Isabel, and would be accepted by her.

The Colonel had no time for more inquiries, because the mummers were known to have left the village. He discredited the tale ; but still it recalled a transient and painful doubt, raised by a slight occurrence at dinner, which must now be detailed before the mummers come,—the supicion that Isabel's intercourse with mother O'Neill did not commence two days previously, and was not at an end yet.



CHAPTER XIX.

CHRISTMAS MUMMERS.

'It was about Yule, when the wind blew cool,
And the round tables began,
O ! there is come to our king's court
Many a well-favour'd man.'

Old Ballad.

THE BALLAD OF THE LADY AMY.



LIGHTINGS still flashed amid the rain,
And glared the pools among ;
The distant thunder growled again ;
The wind moaned loud and long.

When breathless in the brake she stayed
Her flight so swift and wild ;
Paused dripping, shuddering, and dismayed,
The Baron's only child.

Say ! why beneath the copse she cowers ?
Why bends her ear in fear ?
Why starts she forth, to quit those bowers
When echoes strike her ear.

Of horse hoofs thundering o'er the moor ?
Of her own name with curses sore ?
But O ! the thorny bush hath caught her,—
And O ! the sudden moon-gleam sought her !

They marked her form in triumph then,
Their steeds reined by her side ;
Two dark, hard, fierce, and steel-clad men
Leaped down in wrath and pride.

They'll kindly, sure ! that maiden greet !
That lady good and fair !
They'll bear her home to shelter meet,
With tender love and care !

' Father,' she cried, ' forgive and spare,'
She shrieked in wild alarm.
' Oh, Father ! pity my despair.'
Imploring, she clasped his arm.

But pity knew no welcome there,
In that stern, cruel breast ;
He came not there his child to spare,
Nor give her terrors rest.

With steeled grasp her form he held ;—
Then to his comrade cried,
' Here, mount ! and take this rebel maid,
I'll fling thee up thy bride.

' And should she still reject thy will,
The tower her rest shall be,
Till want and woe make torture slow,
And bend her will to thee.'

The storm had ceased its grief to mourn ;
The moon shone calm, though faint ;
But who can all the woe forlorn
Of this poor captive paint !

They shut her close within the tower,
And bade her watch till night,
In scorn, they said, her lady's bower
Should then receive its knight.

She crouched, and listened, hour by hour,
That night, next day, till night again ;
When midnight darkened o'er the tower,
Then misery turned her brain.

She deems she hears the tread she fears,
Of mailed steps ascending !
She dared not wait to meet the fate,
In that closed room impending.

Th' unbolted door she quickly clears,
In dread flight upward tending,
Her beating heart she hears, and hears
Those mailed steps ascending.

The parapet at once she nears,
O'er the giddy turret bending,
She hears no word, she only hears
Those mailed steps ascending.

In terror uncontrolled she springs
Upon the turret wall ;
Herself into the air she flings,
The hard earth felt her fall.

And pain, and want, and dread, and grief,
Will touch her now no more !
The hard stones gave that maid relief,
Her troubled life is o'er !

Yet still a spirit haunts that tower,
Through the dark hours of night ;
And still within her dreary bower,
Sleepers may long for light.

For oft times may be heard the sound
Of mailed steps ascending :
And oft a spectre past will bound,
In dread flight upward tending.

‘Bravo ! beautiful ! considering the author, first rate !’ exclaimed Colonel Walpole, that day at the dinner-table. ‘My dear wife, I did not know our village possessed such a genius, nor our tower such a story, if the truth be told. Read them my dear !’ and he tossed the copy across to his wife.

‘The Ballad of the Lady Amy :—Oh yes, I know her sad story,’ replied Mrs Walpole. ‘Some people will tell you that they have seen her, and many more that their fathers and mothers have.’

‘Have you, mamma ?’ exclaimed a little voice close by, in a tone of anxious interest.

‘I ! my dear, no. I don’t believe in ghosts,’ replied mamma.

‘Don’t you ?’ observed a lady at the table.

It almost seems reasonable that the memory of a great crime should be thus perpetuated for generations.’

‘I doubt if any one was ever hindered from the commission of one, by dread of a future ghost appearing after his death,’ observed Colonel Walpole drily.

'Ah ! now you are laughing at me, Colonel. But it seems just, that such unceasing horror should attend such wickedness.'

'Just ! that this unhappy girl should be terrified out of senses and life, and then obliged for ever after to be "the spirit that must bound, in dread flight upward tending," as the verses have it ! a most energetic ghost that, by the way, and more hardly treated than usual ! I think I could stand a solemn passing by—and an immediate vanishing—considering the mischievous fright I should put everybody in ;—but to be condemned to bound for the benefit of my successive descendants—no ! I should fail to see the justice of this—no, I won't believe in ghosts.'

'Now, Mrs Walpole, I appeal to you, don't you think there may be some truth in them ?'

'I rather agree with William, that it was hard to entail such an active future upon the Lady Amy by her cruel ill-treatment ! and about ghosts, I cannot tell. We seem to dwell so near another world, and at the same time to be so entirely separated from it, in all ordinary circumstances, that it is hard to say, whether or not exceptions may be made for extraordinary occasions. I imagine the belief in ghosts does serve to clothe excessive wickedness with peculiar horror. But we must remember,' she added, lowering her voice, so as not to be heard at the children's table, 'that the tower is to be slept in to-night, and we may cause useless fright by talking about it.'

'Oh, nonsense,' exclaimed her husband. 'Here, children, have you read these lines ? they purport to have been written by some one in the village, and I hear they are to be recited by the mummers this evening. Shall I read them aloud now ?'

No one replied for a moment—then a voice said, 'I think nurse Thirswell has done so already ; thank you uncle.'

‘With her own comments and commendations, I suppose ! Does any one know the author ?’

‘No ; none of us,’ was the general reply.

‘I never heard the story before, did you ?’

‘Yes !’ said Hotspur. ‘I have heard of it !’

‘Have you ? who told you ?’ inquired the Colonel carelessly.

Well ! who had ? why mother O’Neill chiefly, solely, as far as his startled memory could recollect. She had hinted at it, and he was at her bidding to personate the ghost ; but it did not suit him to claim acquaintance with her at all—what a stupid goose he had been to say anything ! But now to answer quickly—perhaps ‘Grace had told him’—but she was of no use to shelter him—he had arranged to use Isabel, so he said, that he had heard it from Isabel or Grace (in a low voice), and he believed it came from mother O’Neill !

Now what would Isabel do ?

She looked up quickly, and was on the point of exclaiming that she had never heard the tale, when her eye caught Grace’s, who had been dining downstairs on that day, at the same time that her ear caught the woman’s name ; and she stopped suddenly, surprised and concerned.

When her glance travelled on from theirs to the elders’ table, she encountered a stare of surprised displeasure from her uncle, and of curiosity and suspicion from so many others, as abashed and half terrified her. She would almost rather have encountered a ghost, than this creeping coil of doubt and displeasure, which seemed to be winding round her.

The Colonel turned away.

Tom and Roger did not observe all this bye-play. If the truth must be told, they were ruminating on the question of ghosts, and their appearing !

This copy of the ballad had appeared in the house during the morning, sent, no one knew by whom. And as it was considered part of the evening's entertainment, no one liked to inquire. Mrs Thirswell had read it aloud to the younger children in the school-room, in which Tom had been seated, and had accompanied the lecture with sundry superstitious tales, calculated to make an impression on her hearers. Tom had given the ballad to Roger just before luncheon, and in a slight degree imparted to him his own uncomfortable feelings. However, they now gave themselves a good shake to get rid of their fancies, and Roger said it was all stuff and nonsense, and Tom, that he would lock the door.

'*Can you?*' asked Hotspur. 'Besides that would be of no use; the ghost could get through the key hole.'

'No! why should it?' inquired Big Howard, 'the thing is always bounding up stairs, according to the ballad. It won't come near Roger and Tom under any circumstances. All they can hear are the mailed steps ascending. And they won't be afraid of them. I suppose!'

'What becomes of them?' inquired Billy, in an awed tone.

They follow the ghost,' replied Howard, in the same tone, 'until it bounds over the parapet, then they cut a caper, and disappear . . . horrible, Billy! is it not?' he added, laughing.

The joke was of use, as it dissipated the groundless terror of the two boys, and with a merry laugh all arose to inspect the hall, with its garlands and 'gaiety,' as the children called it.

Hotspur followed in high spirits. He had no doubt that mother O'Neill was the writer of the ballad, or at least that she had some hand in it. And he felt proud of his co-conspirator's talent. She had produced just the impression she desired, without herself appearing.

‘I could not have done it,’ thought Hotspur to himself ; in which idea, probably, the reader, and all who knew him, would concur.

We may pass on to the evening. By about five o’clock the dinners and teas were finished, and the company assembled in the front hall, and drawing-rooms. Word was given that the procession of mummers were approaching the house ; and, in consequence, all the guests from the drawing-room assembled in the dining-room, which was in darkness, to gaze out of its windows at the spectacle. More than a hundred people were outside, winding their way up the entrance, to the square in front. They were carrying numerous torches and lanterns, which threw a bright and ruddy glare upon themselves, and the extraordinary looking figures in their midst, as well as upon the front of the house, and the old grey tower, rendering the shadows darker and the aspect of the whole weird to a degree most impressive to the children. Nearer and nearer they approached, talking busily, so that the hum of their voices mingled with their discordant musical instruments, added a medley of sounds as bizarre as their general appearance.

Arrived in front of the house, the crowd opened, and the drums, fifes, etc., etc., ceasing their fanfan, old Father Christmas, surrounded by his various attendants, among which the ‘auld rags of the auld year,’ were very conspicuous, advanced, with a stooping tottering gait to the Hall door. This was thrown open, and Colonel Walpole, surrounded by his guests and children, backed by his servants, and supported by his wife, came forward to greet him.

‘Well, good old Father,’ exclaimed the Colonel’s cherry voice, ‘So you are come again, with all your goodly family. We bid you a hearty welcome to the Hall, you and all our good friends. I hope no Christmas will ever

come without our doors being open to receive you, and you willing to enter.'

'Hurrah ! Hurrah for the Colonel and his good lady, our Miss Jane !' exclaimed the people, 'Miss Jane and her folks, God bless them, were always kind, and the Colonel as good as the best of them. Come on boys.'

'Stay !' exclaimed their leader, raising his long white staff. 'I have been here for nigh upon fifty years, Christmas after Christmas, and for many of them I've been the old Father himself ; and there aint none of you as can say, 'God bless the Colonel,' heartier than I do ! but I'm not going to speechify. I've got two or three new folks to introduce to the master and mistress before we go in. Here be the father and mother of rags, the Gaffer and granny of all the old clothes of the year ; and there's another lady here too—' continued old Father Christmas, looking round and hesitating—' but I don't see her, only she was to come, the spirit of the Lady Amy. I suppose she's late, and if so, your honour must excuse her—'

Colonel Walpole was about to reply, when a tall and most alarming figure rose, as if by magic, close to the old speaker, startling even him : 'Ho ! be that you,' he ejaculated.

But 'answer came there none.' The figure bowed its head, and laying its pale finger on its pale lips, it motioned to enter the house. Father Christmas was restored to his self-possession instantly. He hastily placed himself in the post of leader, and accompanied by this formidable figure, and followed by the rest of the mummers, he entered the front hall. It need scarcely be said that no policeman nor servant had to clear the way !

After perambulating the hall, and so allowing time for the 'quality' to get seated in their posts of honour, Father Christmas again approached, and to the general roar of the 'musickers,' as little Walpole called them,

mixed with the shouts of the assembled multitude, he drank, in a pint of ale, to the future happy New Year of the family. 'A merry Christmas and a happy New Year,' resounded through the hall again and again. But no healths were drank at present. This ceremony belonged to after supper time.

Silence was now somewhat noisily summoned, that the ballad of the Lady Amy might be recited. The 'ghost' again uprose in loftier proportions than ever. Indeed, some of the elder guests suspected the old trick of the carpet broom; but whether true or not, no one attempted to discover. And the song began to a dismal accompaniment, croaked forth by a flute or some instrument of the sort. As the interest of the tale increased, the voice grew wilder and more emphatic. And when the lines, descriptive of the last scene, were repeated, they were accompanied by a tattoo of a stick on the floor, or the real clank of a heavy nailed shoe, that sounded wonderously like the terrible noise that drove the Lady Amy to self-destruction.

The singer seemed to throw 'itself' into the interest of the song, with more keenness and life, than from its character, it was at all licensed to show. But the audience were not critical. The effect on them was thrilling, and a dead silence fell, as the song came to its close.

It was broken by Colonel Walpole, who, in the name of all present, thanked the singer, and invited it and its companions to the supper laid for them in the banqueting-hall beyond. Thither they all trooped, glad to shake off the superstitious tremours with which all were more or less oppressed. And supper began in good earnest. But one couple remained outside.

It was the rag pair, holding their dog.

'Wol, wot be us to dew wid 'un, then?' inquired Kitty,

I tould ee not tew bring en. Its a zhamé to bother ourselves wid babbies, whan we've got none.'

'The beast is mazed,' retorted Bob. 'How could I tell he'd be so? I zim he's afeard of the ghost!'

'Pish—'er's daft!' said Kitty.

'Now Kitty! 'er's a rare beauty,' exclaimed Bob. 'Hush now, Tear'em, hush now, down, down, there's a good dog now.'

'And be ye a gewing to stand hooshing of 'um all the rest of the evening?' inquired Kitty, 'because that zupper looks good.'

'Noa,' said Bob. 'Here, I'll tie 'un to this tree.' And he lowered the dog for the purpose; but scarcely had he done so, when Tear'em flew off, with the most savage of snarls, after a figure stealing out of the house. It was the 'ghost' of the Lady Amy. Kitty started back in something very like terror, and seized her husband's arm.

'I don't like it,' quoth she.

But at the moment Tear'em received a blow from the ghost's stick, so indubitably real, that he rushed away with a yell of pain, and Bob,—recognised mother O'Neill!

''Tis the mother, Kitty,' said he.

'Eh! but 'er's alive, bean't her?'

'Tut, Kitty woman, and zo's that! I wonder now . . . but it was well us held Tear'em fast, I would not like to 'ave geed 'er up.'

'Noa! no; us'll gew back, Bob,' said Kitty, with a sigh of relief, 'and never mind Tear'em, us cant catch en, and us 'll lose our zupper.'

So Bob and Kitty returned: Bob questioning and wondering in his own mind, what it could all mean; but he could not make it out. What clue could there be between mother O'Neill in that mummer's dress, and mother O'Neill at Tenderden farm, bargaining for that crazy pony? Yet some clue he was sure there was. And he returned

to his supper eager to discover it, and eager also to save mother O'Neill from being discovered.

But with all his care the news spread before the feast was over, that she had been seen again, for others had recognised her ; and even that she had, with unpardonable effrontery, abused the Colonel's hospitality as a mummer ! The wrath of the other mummers was great indeed, when they discovered who their tall companion was, whom they had imagined to be a bulky well known village girl.

The Colonel's feelings on the subject may be conceived—they cannot be described.

'Did she dare to speak to any one?' he demanded of the butler, by whom this news reached him.

'Not that we exactly saw, sir ; we did not see the ghost speak to any one, but then we never thought of watching it, we could not say that it did, sir !'

'Speak out Gibbons, can't you ?'

'I'm loth to speak, sir ! because some fancy that it did sign to Miss Isabel, sir ; just before she went out, but we couldn't say for certain sir !'

'No one imagines that Miss M'Ivor spoke to her ?' exclaimed the lady next the Colonel.

The butler hesitated again : 'Well ma'am ! when we began thinking—we thought she must have ! leastwise Miss M'Ivor was there at first—but she must have gone out just as the ghost did ; for I saw her come back directly afterwards. Some thought they saw her take the hint to follow that old gipsy, and even sign back—.'

Which was pure imagination on the part of those who 'began thinking.'

But at this moment, the healths of the young M'Ivors was about to be proposed. Those of the family had been given. 'The Colonel and Mrs Walpole,'—'Master Walpole at sea,'—'Master Tom, Miss Amy, and the little

Masters and Mistresses,'—Major and Mrs M'Ivor ; our Miss Fanny, God bless her,'—and——!' the M'Ivor family was coming, when urged by an uncontrollable impulse, which he deeply regretted the next minute, the Colonel rose and stopped the proceedings. His tone was harsh, and his manner almost fierce, as he summoned his guests to clear the tables, and begin the games : 'As it was getting late,' he said, but no one imagined this to be the reason.

The whispered rumours against Isabel gained strength every minute, spreading and increasing most disastrously. Nurse Thirswell alone defended her in the kitchen department ; for now Luxton dared not. And even nurse could give no reason, because if she had guessed aright, Isabel would wish her to be silent.

Then nurse was not popular, nor was mother O'Neill ; any person 'forgathering' with her must, under the most favourable circumstances, have incurred much public disfavour. James had known that Miss M'Ivor had kept away from the dining-room, long enough to allow the gentlemen to get out, when the loss of the purse was first discovered ! Another servant had seen her steal in late, the second time, on that evening, and, of course, the woman was gone, when she was asked for ! Another maid had seen agitation enough to belong to any amount of guilt ; to which, of course, she chose to attribute it ! and so the poor girl's character fared badly among them all. It must be remembered that the mother was an object of superstitious terror to nearly all of them.

'Look ! she's going away, how ashamed she does look ! and no wonder.'

'Aye—and I've just heard James say that the Colonel has sent her off ! and he says that the Colonel has told her he will know all about it to-morrow, and she's to go to

her own room, and to bide there, if she is not locked in, till the Colonel has spoken to her—and she will be locked in for certain, if she don't obey now! so James says. It's a terrible bad business—I should think he'd send 'em all away for it!

Which had merely this foundation: that the Colonel had said aside to Isabel, 'Surely, Isabel, it cannot be that you know where mother O'Neill is?'—'Uncle Walpole! indeed not,' was the reply.

Oh! whither will not gossip run when it is once set off! Isabel was simply going to her mother—and the Colonel was simply very provoked indeed, and worried. He could not doubt his niece's probity; but he did exceedingly doubt his young guest Hotspur, and his younger niece Grace. Moreover, he was teased beyond expression, by the annoying, even alarming certainty, that something unpleasant and mysterious was looming in the distance.

Before long the rumours reached Grace. She was thunderstruck at hearing them. Isabel's repeated agitation and Billy's story returned to her recollection, and she bitterly regretted having refused both a hearing. Isabel suspected of losing the purse! Isabel believed to have warned mother O'Neill off, when she could only have done so to shelter Grace herself! and 'all the same,' as Billy had previously concluded, Grace 'was sure she had done nothing of the sort!' Grace was hurrying off, when she was caught by Hotspur, who had observed her restlessness, and guessed its cause.

'Grace,' he whispered, 'where are you going? you can't see Isabel. She'll be locked up if you attempt to go near her. She will indeed.'

'Why?' inquired Grace, fiercely.

'Because your uncle has said so. He will inquire to-morrow.'

'I will go to him at once,' cried Grace. 'At once,' she repeated, trying to force her way through the crowd.

'It is of no use. He won't listen to-night. He has said so. Wait until to-morrow. You will only get Isabel into worse trouble. To-morrow you can tell all; and she is now asleep, probably.'

'I won't wait,' cried Grace.

'Well, do your will; but I thought you cared for Isabel.'

'So I do,' exclaimed Grace, bursting into tears, in spite of herself.

'Then wait—do wait. We will set it all right to-morrow. Hush Grace—we are watched.'

'What do I care?' cried she. 'I want to speak.'

But Hotspur did care, and withdrew, watching her, however, anxiously, as she stood doubting. It ended at last in her running hastily up the stairs, upon which he moved away with an impatient gesture.

She flew to her sister's room.

'Isabel—Isabel! let me come in.'

But there being no response to her agonised whisper, directed at the key-hole, she cautiously opened the door, and was bitterly chilled by the coldness and darkness within. She crept to the bed, and having ascertained that Isabel was not asleep in it, nor in it at all, she crept away again, with all the bursting revelation of her trouble stoppered within her, by not finding Isabel to receive it, and with more mistrust and dislike of Hotspur than ever.

She returned to the banqueting-hall. She could not stand the loneliness upstairs, and sought refuge in numbers from her own thoughts. She retired to a lonely window-seat. Before long she became aware of figures and whisperings outside; and after straining her eyes into the darkness, she distinctly perceived mother O'Neill and Hotspur talking

together at some little distance. A sudden light had accidentally been cast upon them.

They evidently objected to its glimmer, and withdrew. But the sight of them made her think ; she began to connect the ghost, and the tower, and the key ; and the more she thought, the more frightened she got. The result of her cogitations was to carry her up into the chamber she shared with Amy, to the window-sill, looking towards the tower. For a long time she sat, inside the window curtains, intently watching it, nor did she stir, when Amy at last came to bed, excessively tired and sleepy.

Amy got into bed without discovering her cousin, and fell fast asleep. A fate that befell poor Grace also in her nook. There she slumbered, as soundly for about two hours, as Amy did in her bed.

Bob and Kitty had retired with the rest of the company, and had withdrew to their cottage without finding Tear'em. It was too late to look for him then, so both repaired to their beds. But Bob was too restless to remain there long.

'I cant abide here, Kitty ! It's no use my trying. I'm zartin zur zum dreadful mischief 'll happen to-night, if I doant go and see.

'And what good do ye 'spect to do?' asked sleepy Kate, 'why cant ye lie still like a rayzonable body, and bide till morning?'

'I can't then ! I maun go and zee. Good night to 'ee. Mind, yer let Tear'em in, if he come to the door.'

'Aye, aye ! I wish ye'd bide where ye be !'

'No—noa—I can't—good night.'

But it was past ten a long time before Bob left. And past eleven, nearly twelve, when Grace was slumbering on her perch in her vain attempt to watch.



CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TOWER.

'I wad gie a' my goud, my bairn,
Sae wad I a' my fee,
For ae blast o' the western wind,
To blaw the reek frae thee.'

Old Ballad.



HOTSPUR and mother O'Neill had withdrawn from the light, which disclosed their forms to Grace, into a place of impenetrable shade, to continue their conversation. Hotspur was annoying the mother excessively. She found him ready for nothing, but possessed of the key, and much disposed to dally with her, before giving it up. He had brought it with him; but he would not explicitly say so, and with all her cunning, she could not make him out.

'You must provide me some dress, mother,' he was saying. 'How should I have been able to fit myself with one here, with no one to help me?'

'A long shirt—can't forget a long shirt—you have one of your own, surely?'

'Not half long enough. It won't reach nearly to my knees. I had thought of one of the girls' night-gowns, but

how was I to get them ; or a sheet, but I know no one here to get me that either.'

'You had none on your bed, I suppose?' was the impatient reply.

'Oh! I can go and get one, so I can! only I shall never get back again through all those people.'

'Never, I should think—not you, at least. I tell you what, master, you must wear this dress,' pointing to her mummer's garment. 'It's very long for you, but there is nothing else to be done. You said that you would be ready, but I might have known that you would not. I suppose you have not the key either?'

'Yes, yes, I have, all safe and sound. You may scold, mother, but you wouldn't have got that without me. I'll unlock the door in good time. When are we going to begin?'

'Half-an-hour after the two boys are in bed, and the place quiet. You meet me——.'

'How are we to know?' interrupted Hotspur.

'When the candles are out, you gaby,' exclaimed the bothered mother. 'Really, Master Hotspur ——.'

'Well, well,' returned the boy, feeling intolerably small, 'I will watch and come.'

'You come, when all is quiet, to the old summer-hut yonder, and I will be there. Bring the key, and bring your dog ——.'

'I suppose I can find him ——.'

'Suppose!' panted mother O'Neill; 'give me the key, Master Hotspur, and I'll do it all. Where is your dog? Go and fetch him at once, and we'll tie him up there now.'

'Then he'll bark there, mother.'

'Muzzle him! my stars!' exclaimed mother O'Neill. 'Go and fetch him.'

Hotspur did as he was bid. All his efforts at independ-

ence only resulted in keeping hold of the key, which, he rightly conceived, to be his only bond upon his accomplice. He brought the dog, with a cord, a remarkable piece of readiness on his part, and Pincher was safely fastened to the upright of the summer-house. Mother O'Neill had left her red cloak there, for which she intended to change her ghost's attire; when, remembering that the latter garment might be useful to scare intruders, should any approach, she covered it instead with her cloak, and composed herself in the warmest corner she could find. She did not sleep. She had been afraid of bringing much gin with her, lest sleep might overpower her. She had a little, a very little, almost required just then on account of the piercing cold—but that was all.

Her thoughts were exciting her beyond measure, as she sat waiting.

Another half night, and she might be free and gone. She clutched her stick tightly, as she realized it. And the purse would be returned, and Isabel M'Ivor exculpated. Both would afford her real satisfaction. Isabel was the only person who had spoken kindly to her for many a long weary year, except Bob Dacres, but he could bear no comparison to that young lady. And it had given her deep pain to observe the girl's saddened shrinking expression that evening, and to know what sorrow she was causing her. The detention of the purse, too, was an additional burden upon her conscience, which she would gladly cast off, for the sake of her own self-respect, and Jem's esteem.

Gradually the night drew on. The bitter cold was 'eating' into her, though, except by a long shiver now and again, she scarcely noticed it. The hours were struck by the large stable clock. It was nearly ten, and Hotspur had not come, nor had the motley procession of guests

yet emerged from the house. But very shortly after, she heard their drums, and fifes, and fiddles, and could see the glare of their torches, and their figures, as they came into view (for she was a little behind the tower), and then wound away out of sight and sound. At about the same time, a light appeared in the tower window, announcing that Roger and Tom were going to bed. Soon after, Hotspur appeared, or rather, could be heard in the summer-house; for it was too dark to see. And the first words he uttered, were spoken in a tone of triumph and glee.

‘Mother! I’ve white-washed my face.’

Mother started from her seat. ‘Well you have done it!’ she exclaimed.

‘Why? I thought I had done very well.’

‘Oh, if you like it. No one else need mind.’

‘It is just a little hot; but that will go off soon, you know.’

‘Where did you get it? is it strong?’ she inquired, really feeling for his folly.

‘There was some in the kitchen for dipping the berries in. I stole in and found it. I don’t know about its strength; what harm will it do?’

‘None perhaps. But you will find out if it does. But put on this dress; I should have been safer in it, but you must take it. Now, are you ready?’ she added, after a pause of impatience.

‘No—I can’t see—I can’t—I can’t get into it!’

‘Can’t you feel?’

‘Yes—no—I’ve got the neck upside down, I believe.’

Mother O’Neill seized the garment, and pushed him into it, and then demanded, ‘Have you got the key?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘mind Pincher.’ And the dog was untied, and they started.

They had not advanced six steps when a furious bark-

ing arrested them. Out of the bushes there darted, and snarled a most wrathfully fierce little dog, who attacked them generally, and the mother in particular. Pincher was not to be outdone. He had shaken off Hotspur's flimsy muzzling, and began a defensive warfare, fully as noisy and alarming as the puppy Tear'em, who was the beast in the bushes.

'Drat the dogs!' exclaimed mother O'Neill. 'Let them go! let them go! we shall be found out to a certainty!'

'What can I do without Pincher?' groaned Hotspur, in despair.

'Let them go! I say—at once. Go! go!' she exclaimed, as she drove the quarrelling animals away. 'We must get in directly, or we shall be stopped. Once in, we can hide.'

'But my dog? what *shall* I do without Pincher?' repeated Hotspur.

Mother O'Neill's only reply was to take him fiercely by the shoulder, and hurry him on towards the tower. But his long garment forbade too much hurry; and his face was getting very hot indeed; and the loss of his dog, and his trouble altogether were too much for him, and he began to whimper.

His companion ruthlessly pushed him along, with sounds so like muttered curses, that Hotspur's woe became fright; and this so overcame him, that by the time he reached the tower door, he had no wits left wherewith to find the key.

He began fumbling; but the old woman soon cut him short. She dived fiercely into one pocket after another, and finding the key at last, she noiselessly unlocked the door, entered, shoving Hotspur in before her, and locking them both in, she deposited the key safely in her own pocket. She then proceeded to light the dark lantern

that she had brought with her, and throwing away her match, she turned upon the trembling boy a glance of contempt and triumph, not at all calculated to reassure him.

‘Now, you follow me, and do as I bid you,’ she hoarsely whispered ; and it was the last notice she took of him.

Hotspur had no choice but to obey. He had no dog, no key, no courage left. He was encumbered in his long unmanageable dress, and his face was getting sadly burnt with the hot preparation he had daubed over it. But his companion heeded him not. She was within reach of the desire of years, and her excitement was intense. She had but to find the entrance to the vault, and her path was clear, and the treasure surely her own !

‘Had *but* to find !’ Alas, under all those plastered, white-washed, mended walls and floors, how could she do it ? but this had not struck her yet. She felt round the lower chamber first, moving all the lumber cautiously, but rapidly from the walls. She could find no trace there ; but this did not surprise her. She remembered descending many winding steps in the tower. So she stole up the stairs to the next storey, and the next, and the next ; turning the contents of each into its centre, as noiselessly, but as rapidly, as she could, keeping Hotspur close to her side all the time. No trace could she find anywhere, but she did not expect it yet. She expected it in the upper loft. She became, however, more and more absorbed in her search, more and more excited, more and more fierce towards her victim, who in pain and terror, would have given his pony fifty times over to escape.

But it was in vain to indulge in any hope or wish distinct from her’s. Up she went, past the boys’ sleeping chamber, to the last loft, where she hoped and expected to find the entrance. With energy, increasing to agonised excitement, as her search still bore no fruit, she pulled aside

one box after another, till none remained in her way. She passed along the wall—probing it all over, but no trace could she find of an opening. She seized a rake, which she had brought from below, and attacked what plaster, and what woodwork there was. Down it all came under her ruthless blows, and the bare, scarred face of the wall appeared—still no trace ; she tapped along it, and listened—no sound anywhere betrayed a hollow behind !

She paused ; and pressed one hand across her brow, as if to recall the circumstances of that dreadful exit. If the walls upward were impenetrable, could she have entered near the floor ! A low skirting ran round the chamber ; she gazed at it in suspense and doubt, then inserting her rake, she tore it wildly down, then looked, and looked,—no trace—all was solid wall.

With a low cry, her head sank on her breast, and clutching the useless board, she leant forward trembling violently. But she gave way only for a minute. She sprang up, and with a face of woe, rendered the more ghastly by the white-wash she had applied for her ghost's attire, she recommenced her search, tearing down the plaster and woodwork in room after room, and tapping, tapping the bare wall everywhere, dragging the hapless Hotspur after her, for he dared not propose to leave her, if it were to save his life.

If not near the walls, it might be in the very centre of some floor ; and again she dragged aside the boxes, her violent exertions only stayed for that pause of recollection, that seemed to produce nothing. Down the tower and up again she passed, searching everywhere in vain.

A third and fourth time she did so, till it seemed that her senses were giving way under her excitement. And still Hotspur was her hurried and terrified attendant. At length, as the clock struck twelve, its solemn notes recalled her for a

moment from her wildness, and made her pause in her ceaseless search. The boy's senses then became aware of a fresh danger—fire.

He had smelt smoke in their last descent. Then he was too much occupied to think about it ; but now, on again approaching the lower chamber, he could no longer be insensible to their approaching destruction. He tried to rouse his companion, but it was of no use. She could not receive an idea, other than the one that was driving her up and down the tower in that ruthless, miserable manner. Her strength was becoming less, but her will and determination were as strong as ever. And down into the very smoke she went, until a sense of suffocation forced her up again. Still she continued testing the walls and floors of what rooms were free, as if her only chance of success depended upon her fierce and prolonged endeavour. It was awful to see her. She never paused in her search, except now and then to clasp her brow, and utter the same low cry that had before thrilled through Hotspur. Whilst on his part, terror at the fire and terror at his companion's behaviour, were creating punishment enough for his ill-conduct.

He was not, however, the only person thoroughly terrified by all this turmoil, for the woman's hunt had become at last by no means inaudible. And it required only a frightened imagination to suppose the rapid passing up and down stairs to be 'those mailed steps ascending ;' nor the scrambling figure of Hotspur, as with his long white robe, and his lantern, he followed the hasty steps of his mistress. to be :—

‘ The spectre that must bound
In dread flight upward tending !’

Roger and Tom awoke at last by the noise, had peeped out, when they could bear the silence and darkness of

their own room no longer, and had caught sight of him, vanishing up the stairs. But not recognising their luckless companion in that weird figure, they shrank back scared, behind their door.

They would have bolted it, but the bolt was rusty, and refused to move ; besides, they had a trembling conviction that bolts were useless against ghosts. They felt like travellers in a thunderstorm, afraid to move, lest they might attract the lightning ; they dared not scream, still less run out, so they sought the refuge of their bed, and covering themselves up with the bed-clothes, remained there, listening, with ever increasing dread, to the ceaseless tramp going on in the passage. The smell of smoke luckily did not reach them to add to their terrors.

But in the lower regions the smoke had burst into flame, and this fortunately became visible to Grace in her window-seat, and shortly after to Bob Dacres. The latter having ascertained what it meant, and being on the high-road to the town, at once hurried on for the fire-engine, wisely rousing the neighbours as he went along. But Grace, whom the light of the flames awoke, had no sooner realised its import, than she rushed off to her sister's room.

' Isabel, Isabel !' she exclaimed, ' Roger and Tom will be burnt alive. The tower is on fire !'

Isabel sprang out of bed, and seeing the state of things in a glance, hurried on her clothes.

' Run to my uncle, Grace,' she cried. ' I will go in by the conservatory door, and wake the boys. See, the flames do not seem to have reached it yet. But there is not an instant to be lost. He must get us out, outside. Run Grace !'

' Oh, is it my fault ? Oh, Isabel !'

' Run, sister run, we must not stop to think, go instantly !'

And Isabel, wearing only her woollen clothes, and pro-

vided with a thick hooded wrap, ran hastily downstairs. She crossed the hall, passages and conservatory ; but she had reckoned wrongly, the flames had reached the door, at least their forked tongues were shooting up the stairs, endeavouring to find something to fasten upon, and it was most perilous to pass them. But Isabel never hesitated for a moment. She paused, at the risk of her life, to close the door behind her, lest the fire should spread to the house, and then closely wrapped her head and all in her cloak, she charged through the gathering flames, which very soon indeed united behind her into one broad conflagration, and hissed up the stairs to the second storey, cutting off all access to the upper part of the tower. Isabel was nearly suffocated by the heat and smoke, but she did not stumble. She bore on her way bravely, until she reached her brother's room. Then exhausted she sank on his bed, only able to exclaim, 'Open the window ! quick, and shut the door.'

'Is, that you ?' exclaimed both boys, scrambling out at once, overjoyed at the deliverance her presence promised them.

'What made you come,' they asked. 'What can it all mean ? is it the ghost !'

'Open the window, and shut the door,' gasped Isabel.

What is it, fire ! smoke,' exclaimed the boys, alive to a new terror.

'Uncle is coming,' faltered their sister, sadly in want of the fresh air, 'the window, the window.'

And then the boys obeyed her. And as soon as the keen fresh air had revived her a little, they made her listen to the mysterious noises, which had just begun again overhead.'

'Some one else is there,' she exclaimed. 'I must go and see.'

'Oh Isabel, you cannot ; it has been going on all

night, it is not the ghost? we were so glad when you came, we saw a white figure, we did indeed.'

'It must be some one, I must go and see, I am better now, indeed I can, I must,' and she threw on her wrap again, and was gone before the boys could stop her.

The smoke was thick enough, but she struggled on and hurried into the chamber, where that terrible fruitless search was being still carried on. Even she was most unpleasantly startled at the scene; a white figure erect, with a light, a stooping figure, whose face was so miserable, it might have belonged to a lost soul, were enough 'to appal the stoutest heart.' But Isabel's good sense came to her rescue, and the sight of the lantern told her, as by instinct, that none but human beings could carry it.

She exclaimed, 'What are you doing here? the tower is on fire—quick to the boys' room, or to the leads.'

Her voice released Hotspur from his spell.

'Oh, Miss M'Ivor, Isabel! I am Hotspur, may I go?'

'Yes, to the boys, I will come directly,' and she caught his lantern, and let him go.

Away he flew with the speed of lightning, smoke or no smoke; and quite forgetting his appearance, he sprang in upon Roger and Tom, who were only saved from dashing out of the door to certain destruction, by his being between it and them. But his speech reassured them. 'Isabel is coming,' he cried.

'Who are you! Hotspur! what *are* you about?' exclaimed the others, 'What do you mean by frightening us like this?'

'You haven't been half so badly frightened as I have,' exclaimed he. 'She's gone mad, stark, staring mad.'

'Who? Isabel?' cried the boys, in an agony.

'No; mother O'Neill.'

And Hotspur rapidly described the terrible night he had passed.

Which was not at an end yet, as Tom observed, for how were they to get out, and where was Isabel.

She returned as he spoke, looking as white-faced as Hotspur himself.

'I can do nothing with her,' she said, mournfully. 'She won't stop; all her hope is in the leads; she may go to them at last. Oh, Hotspur, this is dreadful! what is the meaning of it all?'

Hotspur could scarcely tell her; but there was no time for talk. The fire was gaining upon them, and by this time help appeared outside; at least, voices were heard calling out that people had gone for ladders, but could nothing be done before? Could they not tie the sheets together, and scramble down so? No; the sheets were not nearly long enough. But Isabel had snatched up a ball of twine she had passed by in the conservatory, and by the help of this, a rope was safely raised to the window, and securely fastened. One by one, the cowardly Hotspur first, the boys slipped down by it. Both Roger and Tom tried to persuade Isabel to precede them, but it was of no use. There was a hard, stern expression in her face, that they had never seen before, which obliged them to obey. Moreover, there was no time in which to parley. The flames were rising to a room, whose window was under theirs, and if they delayed, probably they might be altogether stopped.

The boys had safely reached the ground, and all looked up for Isabel to follow, when, to the horror of all, she had disappeared. In vain they shouted and called frantically to her; in vain one man began to climb the rope. The threatened flames burst out, caught and divided it, and began, by its means, to climb to the chamber the boys had

left. The distress of all below may be conceived. Grace, and her father, the Walpoles, the servants, the guests, many of the late revellers were gathered together to watch ; and nothing could be done. No human being could get up inside, and the ladders, sent for, were not come. Many ran to hurry their bearers, the rest watched in helpless distress for the end of this tragedy.

After a short interval, which seemed endless to all below, Isabel appeared on the leads, in company with another figure, who was at once recognised as mother O'Neill ; and some of the villagers, at the same moment, declared that the ladders were close at hand. A shout, a deafening shout, rent the air. It struck upon mother O'Neill's dulled senses, and awoke them to a perception of her position. She was seen from below to free herself from Isabel's grasp, to spring upon the parapet. There she poised herself for an instant, and held aloft something, shaking it in the air. Then flinging it downwards as far as she could, as if renouncing it, she either tottered, or flung herself off, shrieking the miserable words, 'Lost—for naught,' and reached the ground with a fearful crash, just as the ladder was planted to rescue both.

Isabel appeared to stagger to the parapet, and she leant over it in a manner that caused a sudden cry to be raised to the man ascending :

'Quick, or she'll follow.'

But she did not. She sank back, and was brought down in safety by her deliverer—none other than her uncle himself.

But she was quite insensible, as he bore her down in his arms. And when she reached the ground, her appearance gave the general impression that she too was dead. Happily the impression was erroneous, but it was a long time before she could be restored to consciousness

Even when this was effected, a doctor, who had by that time arrived, ordered her perfect stillness. She had, he said, received a shock violent enough to make her alarmingly ill, if the utmost care were not taken to keep her quiet.

But, indeed, there was no one there who would not at that moment have engaged to go on tiptoe for the rest of their lives, rather than have hurt her by a sound, so sudden and complete was the reaction in her favour. She was forbidden to speak, or be spoken to. She was carried to her mother's room, by Mrs M'Ivor's urgent request, and laid there, to be carefully tended into safety again, if possible, by those whom she had saved from so much misery. Mrs M'Ivor occupying the dressing-room, whilst her precious child was in danger.

Mother O'Neill was past care. The fall had killed her, as that fall she had sung about had killed Lady Amy. But the purse, which was the something she had flung away, was picked up, and being recognized as the Major's, was brought to him.

It contained all his money, correctly counted, but not a penny of Hotspur's—none of his was ever found again—and a paper with these words :

'What I wait for matters to no one, nor what I seek in the tower ; but I cannot ruin Grace, as I falsely told Miss M'Ivor. I said so to silence *her*, but it was of no use. She is as brave as she is good, and ye are all fools to doubt her. Hotspur warned me, not Miss M'Ivor ; of course, not *she* ! He is a false, stupid boy ; but I have not got his pony, nor shall he have his money. For me ! but it matters not. I would return the purse for Miss M'Ivor's sake, and my own ; I never wished to keep it. I picked it up after Grace had dropped it. Miss M'Ivor is worth you all put together. Fools, the whole pack of you !'

The coroner's inquest was held upon her remains on

the following day. Isabel, of course, could not be present, but her evidence was, under the circumstances, not considered necessary.

Grace gave hers, poor child, in bitter shame and sorrow, yet so truthfully, that she gained the respect of those who heard her. And it cost her intense pain to confess all she had to tell ; yet she spared herself nothing, acknowledging how fearfully wrong her feelings had been towards Roger, and especially speaking of her conduct to her sister, with a keenness of compunction that touched all hearts.

Her aunt and uncle spoke very kindly to her ; her brother explained away in astonishment 'the rascally part' he was supposed to have acted towards her, and, moreover, was, on many accounts, very contrite ; and her father kissed her, and told her to be a good girl. But Amy was her chief comforter. Amy had the greatest possible pity for naughtiness, as we have already seen. And she did consider it so fearfully hard that her cousin's should have been so inflamed and made use of, even to the behaving so ill to Isabel, that Amy pitied, and tended, and fondled her, as much as ever Grace could bear. Not more ! Little Amy's sympathy was too delicately true to be intrusive. Her true instinct seemed to tell her when to stop the expression of her feelings ; and she would then often betake herself to silent prayer for Grace, when her heart was too full to be inactive.

But Grace could not be comforted until Isabel was pronounced out of danger, which, happily, took place in a few days. Previously, she was too utterly miserable to do anything but sit about in the passage or rooms, near her sister's, which she was not at first allowed to enter, gathering tidings from the passers-by.

It was on Sunday afternoon that she was admitted to see her, just to receive forgiveness, and after this she soon

became her chief nurse. Though Isabel was not long in recovering when she was once out of danger.

Within a week she was able to give some account of what happened after she left the lower window. She had sought mother O'Neill in the loft; not finding her there, she was descending to the room beneath the boys, when, fortunately, she met the woman returning. She spoke to her, and endeavoured to guide her into the boys' room; but finding this impossible, she accompanied her to the loft, and, by pretending to assist, had at last, when both were nearly suffocated, persuaded her to come on the leads. She held her there with all her strength, dreading lest the attraction inside should still overcome her influence, and hoping that assistance might come to save them both.

She was quite unprepared for the turn the mother's determination took, and entirely unable to resist it. Indeed, it was well for Isabel that mother O'Neill released herself before the final plunge. She might otherwise very possibly have dragged the girl over with her.

Isabel leant back on her couch, very tired, when this recital was finished. Her mother was sitting by her side, her aunt, with the Colonel and Major, was also in the room.

'Isabel,' said her uncle, 'I think you have had talking enough, but, before I go, I must tell you that the miserable woman's letter was the first intimation I received, or rather understood, that any public misunderstanding existed as to your conduct. Hotspur told me one or two shameless lies, which puzzled me; but, except for one moment, which you know, I never really doubted your uprightness, though I might your wisdom.'

'Thank you, uncle Walpole. But do you still think I was wrong to go to mother O'Neill's?'

'No, not wrong, but more valiant than wise. We should have prevented this end if you had not gone.'

'Isabel could not tell that, William,' cried his wife. 'She had promised me to guide her sister right, if she could, besides it being her natural duty to do so. If she had left any stranger, or less interested person, to follow out the clue to that child's secret, she would have failed to protect her. For the purse alone, probably, she would not have gone.'

'Nothing would have come out, Jane; the mother would have fled just the same.'

'That's as may be! probably not, if we had sent two hours earlier. And that story would not have told to Grace's credit, even unexaggerated. I doubt if it ever could have been forgotten, once told.'

'Then, aunt Jane, you think I have helped Grace?'

'I am sure you have, with untold help. You dared Mrs Thirswell in her favour; you have steadily maintained the right before her, showing her at the same time every possible tenderness and affection; you tried to shelter her from her real enemy, the mother; and you have borne the consequences of her passion and folly, at the risk of your reputation, and even of your life. Grace is not the girl I take her for if she does not respond to all this.'

'O, aunt Jane! aunt Jane! exclaimed Isabel, 'you make me very happy. But I can't understand it; it seemed all such utter failure as the time passed on.'

'Yes, my dear,' replied her aunt. 'So it must. But take this lesson away with you: do your best, as events pass on, and leave the result in higher hands; it is quite safe there. Now, good-night, my dear niece, and may God bless you. You have been a very good girl, I think!'

And Isabel was left alone to rest.'

And still the burden of her deceased aunt's words seemed to re-echo in her thoughts, 'I WILL DO WHAT I CAN, GOD HELPING ME!'



CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

'But happy they, the happiest of their kind,
Whom gentle stars unite, and in one fate,
Their hearts, their fortunes and their beings blend !'

THOMSON'S SEASONS—*Spring*.



UT it was much more than a week before Isabel was permitted to make a regular appearance down stairs.

It would be difficult to describe the feelings of the household towards her. In proportion to her 'degradation' before, was her exaltation now. The good folks of the servants' hall and kitchen department could not shake off their indignation at themselves for the unworthy suspicions they had entertained and spread of her. Whilst the very few, who could flatter themselves that they had read her aright, when 'under the cloud,' now triumphed most rapturously over their less fortunate companions. Mrs Thirswell, in particular, was supremely delighted.

Indeed so grieved and uneasy were the whole assemblage, that on the evening when Isabel first dined down stairs, they gathered, as by irresistible impulse, together, and considered long and earnestly, whether they might not ask leave to express their regret, and ask for her direct forgiveness !

Not a hint did they give of their intentions, until her

bedtime was approaching, then they gathered in the Hall, and sent in an earnest message to Colonel Walpole, that 'he was wanted.'

He returned, looking much amused, and without a word of warning, gave his arm to Isabel, saying to the others,

'Just come into the banqueting-hall a minute, will you?'

His own wife he took possession of, and carried off with him, signing to the Major to bring *his* wife, who was dining downstairs that day in honour of her child.

Mrs Walpole guessed the truth the moment she saw the assemblage, but Isabel did not, until her uncle led her to a chair, and stepping aside, said pointedly,

'These good people want to speak to *you*, my dear.'

'We only want to say, with yours and the ladies' permission, sir,' began the butler, as Isabel turned towards him, surprised and shy. 'We only want to ask Miss M'Ivor's pardon sir, for our bad suspicions of her. We can't think how we could do so, and we want to ask her pardon sir, if you will please to tell her so, sir. We are so very sorry!'

'I think you have done it very well yourself, Gibbons,' said his master; 'and I have no idea that Miss M'Ivor will be hard to persuade—hey, Isabel!'

Isabel's bright and blushing smile was a sufficient answer. She had not seated herself, seeing but one chair; she was standing flanked by her mother and aunt; and, indeed, it was a fair group for the assembled dependents to gaze on.

'I propose we drink her health,' cried the Colonel, 'all of us. Fetch some cider and wine, Gibbons!'

Gibbons obeyed with exceeding alacrity.

'If I may be so bold, ma'am,' said nurse Thirswell, advancing with a beautiful nosegay, 'the gardener has

just given me these, hoping that Miss Isabel will accept them.'

'Yes, indeed ! cried Mrs Walpole, taking them from the good woman's hand, and examining for a moment their exquisite blossoms, whilst her mother pressed Isabel to take the chair placed for her reception.

'Refinement, excellence, beauty, they are appropriate,' murmured Mrs Walpole to herself, as with prompt and skilful fingers she formed them into a wreath.

And this, with almost tears in her eyes, she tenderly pressed on the brows of her niece. 'Oh, Isabel ! how near we were to losing you !' she exclaimed aloud.

The glasses being filled, the Colonel proposed Miss M'Ivor's health. He began his speech quietly enough, and intended so to conclude it, but the remembrance of his niece's patience and courage returned to him so vividly, that it carried him away, and he could not have spoken more warmly in her praise if she had been out of hearing. The plaudits that followed were loud and long. It was a trying moment for Isabel ; but happily her native good manners and presence of mind did not desert her. By look and action, if not by word, she did return her thanks.

But when the cheers were repeated again and again, and it became more than she could stand, her aunt, who had been watching for this moment, twined her arm in the girl's, and escorted her through the hall, murmuring half-playfully, as Isabel silently wished the people good night :

'You see, my dear child, they are reconciling themselves to their own folly. You need not appropriate it all, unless you wish ; they are expressing their repentance. . . But, indeed, my dear niece,' she added more gravely, when the ordeal was somewhat over, 'you deserve a great deal of praise, for you have done very well ; and love you must accept, for it is yours by nature.'

And Isabel realized the first part of her aunt's words, and gratefully accepted the last. She slipped very thankfully away—oh, so tired. Mrs Thirswell attended on her, hurrying her into bed as quickly as she could ; for much as she did admire her young lady, her nurse's instincts told her, that a little more excitement, and Isabel would have a sleepless night. She left her to repose, therefore, directly she was in bed.

But when the candle was out, and all in darkness, Gracey stole in for a kiss.

'Isabel !' she faltered, as she knelt by the bedside, 'I will try my very best ; indeed, I will. How can I ever love you half enough.'

Then she also retired.

'The good God *hath* given, He *will* give the increase, was Isabel's happy thought, as she fell asleep.

Grace did indeed try ! and every one combined to help her. Roger spent all his pocket money in a magnificent Persian cat for her, which it was death for Flossy and Ben, so much as to look at ! of the death of her own poor little mite, whose place was not entirely filled even by this splendid stranger, Grace had heard on Christmas eve, when nurse was so angry at tea.

Mrs M'Ivor also set herself to help her child. She had not passed through those days of dreadful anxiety, when Isabel lay in danger, without some profit. She could not but contrast the influence Isabel had obtained in a few short weeks over Grace, with what she had gained in her whole lifetime, and this helped her to realize somewhat of the consequences of her indolence.

Mrs Walpole proved a true friend to her sister here. Their separation had in a measure opened this lady's eyes. She could not but mourn sadly over the miserable neglect that had left Grace so untutored and uncared for. Mrs

Walpole spoke her mind very truthfully, though as gently, as she could only speak to 'Fanny,' and Fanny showed its fruit by marked kindness to Grace.

Mrs M'Ivor was still very lovely, and Grace was most susceptible to beauty. She would have enjoyed her mother's beauty as she had enjoyed Isabel's singing, but that the one never jarred upon her, and the possessor of the other always did. Now that circumstances had changed, and that the mother tried to give the child her full portion of kindness and attention ; now that Grace might sit unrebuked in that pretty room, and wait on that mother and her dear Isabel, she became, by comparison, supremely happy. Mrs Walpole, too, showed that she read the girl aright, by making her and not the maid, the repository of her orders for the invalids, and their authorised attendant.

This again removed Grace from Mrs Thirswell's care. A mutual relief ! also from the society of children, where pets and temper might be excusable from age ; as they could not be among 'elders,' such as Amy and Isabel, her present companions.

Of course no one can imagine that Grace was cured of all her many faults, and taught all a lady's accomplishments, as by magic ! But it was a wonderful gain to avoid provocations, and to be well and soothingly employed.

As that for 'abominable Hotspur,' he left the neighbourhood immediately, with his father and mother, who had inherited a distant property from their deceased friends. He had been tremendously punished, though not more than he richly deserved—the wretched boy.

Independently of the woes of that night, and the utter failure of all his schemes the loss of his money, which was dissipated, no soul knew whither, and the loss of his pony, he became, not only the laughing stock of everybody, as the mother's dupe, but well nigh the contemned of every-

body by his mode of giving evidence at the Coroner's inquest. He was questioned after Grace, Roger, Bob Dacres, etc., had given their evidence, after, in fact, the whole course of events had become public. He involved himself in a fearful tissue of falsehoods, and was then forced gradually to expose himself, until even he was overwhelmed with shame.

He left Walpole Hall immediately afterwards ; and so he may go out of our story, with all the contempt and disgust such a character must excite.

Yet, perhaps, with a modicum of pity, that his bringing up had been so injudicious.

Still he may go ! we do not want him any more.

* * * * *

In a village churchyard at some distance from the Hall, on a stone slab covering an old vault, were carved these words, following many notices of a similar nature :—

‘ Also to the Memory of SELINA O’NEILL,
Daughter of SAMUEL and JANE CLERY, of DART, in this Parish ;
Wife of ANDREW O’NEILL, Mariner, of the Parish of N—— ;
Born —— ; Departed this Life, December 30th ——,
AGED 54.’

How little would the reader of this bare notice guess, what a tragedy of ruined life it commemorates ! Even the terrible tragedy, and untold misery of a life that had been worse than wasted.

‘ And, under their feet, all scattered lay,
Dead skulls and bones of men whose life had gone astray.’
Fairy Queen.

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